

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE KING OF TERROR

HOLLYWOOD



KEITH TOPPING

'All this useless beauty. All these great leaps forward. And for what? So that the first alien with an advanced degree in interplanetary warfare can take it all from you?'

As the millennium draws to a close, the future of humankind hinges on the activities of one multimedia company, InterCom. Suspecting that old mistakes are being repeated, the Brigadier asks the Doctor and his companions to investigate the company's Los Angeles headquarters. But their infiltration is disrupted by the murderous games of terrorists seeking the fulfilment of age-old prophecies.

While the Doctor and UNIT encounter aliens in the boardroom, Tegan meets a pop star, Turlough finds himself a victim of his own desires and Los Angeles becomes a war zone in which humanity is merely a helpless bystander.

Featuring the Fifth Doctor, Tegan, Turlough, the Brigadier and UNIT, this adventure takes place between the TV stories THE AWAKENING and FRONTIOS.

DOCTOR WHO

THE KING OF TERROR
HEITH TOPPING

BBC

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Dedication

For the *Divine* Audra McHugh.

And Graeme Topping.

‘The music of our heart is *roots* music. Music which recalls history, because without knowledge of your *history* you cannot determine your destiny. Music of the *present*, because if you are not aware of the present then you are like a cabbage in this society. Music which tells of the *future*, and the *judgement* to come.’

The stage introduction to the 1979 Counter-Eurovision Music Festival

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Start!

4 December 1981: San Joaquin Valley, California

Word up.

The silence was deafening.

A still pool of loneliness. Solid and tangible.

Then they came.

And *when* they came, the sky ripped itself apart. Huge and sick. Colossal. White-hot through the ionosphere, burning a trailing plume, a thrashing snake's tail of particles and fine matter.

An arrow through the sacred heart of the heavens.

The clouds were singed and torn. Violated, they parted for the penetration.

The sky bled, the horizon splatter-coloured like a smear of blood. A mute witness to the coming, the sky threw back its head (and wept at the sight). Torrential rain fell like an ocean of bitter tears on the parched earth, churning it to thick, viscous, yellow sludge.

The wind howled and the sun withdrew and hid itself behind a cotton-wool blanket of cloud. And blackness was upon the face of the desert.

The elements *knew* of the coming rape of the Earth.

They couldn't stop it (no one could). The only protest they could make was to scream out loud to anyone capable of listening. Including the rapists themselves.

Jagged lightning flashed and thunder roared and the dust of the barren, choking ground was whipped by the winds from the west into a twisting, writhing tornado that decimated the land wherever it touched.

Inside their cocoon, *they* watched the storm.

Watched it with a detached curiosity through black, lifeless alien eyes from the shelter of their miniature world. They respected the way in which the elements had spoken to them, but they had no fear.

Of the elements.

Or of anything else.

What they *did* have was time to stalk this wasted landscape that was to be their new home.

Time to change, secure and conquer a world.

Prologue

Toy Soldier

28 September 2050: Westcliffe Retirement Home, Sussex

Despite the warm autumn breeze coming through the open French windows and fluttering the lace curtains, the place was dusty and thick with decay. As I moved around the room, introducing myself and explaining why I had come all the way from London, a pair of eyes followed me.

Old eyes.

I picked up the telegram from the mahogany table next to his stiff wicker chair. The paper was shiny and slick. My fingers slid along it like a skater gliding across the ice.

‘From the king?’ I asked, already knowing the answer. I had done my research on this fellow. After all, it isn’t every day you meet a living legend.

He shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, constantly adjusting the tartan blanket that covered his legs. He looked frail. All skin and bone like the discarded husk of a caterpillar after it has metamorphosed.

‘Yes,’ he said with a croaking voice that had once been booming and vibrant. His eyes were misty, bloodshot and distant, wrinkled lids blinking over them. And yet those cold steel-blue eyes still shone with a fierce intelligence. This man was no military fool, no matter what anyone said to the contrary.

His was an utterly remarkable story, even in this age when such tales have become commonplace. A journey to another dimension. A Celtic bride in Avalon. And then twenty years later, he came back to the world that he had left behind. One day, he told anyone willing to listen, (perhaps quite soon) he intended to return to his happy ending in another half of the sky. But for now he was old and ravaged by that most cruel of mistresses, time.

‘You’re a hundred and twenty-one?’ I asked. Despite his frailty he looked not a day over seventy-five.

‘I *might* be,’ he replied sharply, as though I had asked a question concerning national security. The old soldier picked up his glass of diluted orange cordial and took a sip. The scowl on his face told me that the drink tasted bland and insipid. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said with a genuine bewilderment. ‘Mind’s not what it

was, do you see? I become embarrassed when I forget . . . I no longer feel that God is watching over me. Why did you say you were here?’

I replied with possibly offensive slowness. ‘It’s about UNIT.’

‘It’s *always* about UNIT.’

Brigadier General Sir Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart KCB, VC, DC, and a whole alphabet of other letters after his name, was laughing at me. ‘Will the stupid questions never cease?’ he asked, clasping his wizened hands together. ‘I should tell you that I have refused at least a dozen offers from biographers.’

I stood up. ‘I’ll leave if you . . .’

‘Sit down,’ he snapped. ‘You didn’t come all this way to take in the sea air. What do you want?’

‘I’m doing a piece for the *Guardian* . . .’ I began.

I noticed the prickly look of disdain he gave me in return. ‘*Leftist rag*,’ I heard him mutter and I suppressed a smile of admiration. There aren’t many one-nation Tories left in the world. I told him so and the corner of his grey moustache twitched with what I could see was a returning smile.

‘You’re not keen on my politics then?’ I asked.

‘That entirely depends on how they were formed,’ he replied. ‘Everybody’s got to believe in something. What do you believe in?’

‘Belief is fundamental, surely?’

Now he was curious. ‘What’s your name?’

I told him. ‘I may be a bleeding-heart liberal subversive,’ I said ironically, ‘but I’m also a true patriot, sir. I love my country.’ This seemed to pacify him and I continued. ‘As you may know some of the UNIT files have just been released under the eighty-year ruling. Nostalgia about the last century is currently in vogue and . . .’

Clearly he hadn’t known this. ‘You’ve had access to the *files*?’ murmured Lethbridge-Stewart. There was something about the way the question was phrased that told me *he* had placed them in cold storage in the first place.

I persisted. ‘I’ve read them, yes. The invasion of the Cybermen. The Autons. The General Carrington affair. The Stahlman project. Quite a time of it you had?’

‘They came in the old manner, and we saw them off in the old manner,’ he replied quoting Wellington. ‘That’s the trouble with your average alien. They always underestimated humanity. Thought we were a soft touch. They still do.’

‘Still?’ I asked, fishing for clues.

‘Figure of speech,’ he replied, bluntly. ‘We make the standards, and we make the rules. Do you understand?’

I did. ‘I’d like to ask you about one particular case,’ I continued, pushing the record button on my palmtop hard drive. ‘It’s something that crops up in

ministerial minutes, but the NATO files seem to have been mislaid. Who, or what, were “the Waro”?

He shook his head. ‘It was so long ago . . .’

‘I understand. You don’t remember them?’

‘I remember all right.’ Again there was a faraway look in his eyes. Eighty years distant. Painful memories seemed to briefly touch his features. ‘The Devil Goblins from Neptune . . . I rode in a spaceship.’ He cackled and for a second I thought that he was enjoying another joke at my expense. Then I saw that cold look in his eyes again and I knew for certain that he was not.

‘Tell me about them.’

‘They were ferocious creatures. Genetically engineered as the perfect killing machine. There were millions of them. They came in a vast wave, set up a false bridgehead in the Soviet Union and sent us all scurrying around like chickens with our heads cut off. And there were quislings too. Traitors who were prepared to sell out their world to those filthy vermin. Have you got to the Geneva trials yet?’

‘No,’ I said, reading from my notes. ‘I believe they will be available to us next year.’

He smiled, genially. ‘A lot of questions will be answered then. And there’ll be answers that you won’t hear for another few years by which time, thank God, I’ll be gone and you won’t be able to ask me any more of your damn-fool questions.’ There seemed to be an appreciation of death in his voice, as though it were an old acquaintance with whom he had performed a slow waltz on many occasions. ‘As for the Waro . . .’ He pointed with a bony finger through the open windows towards the clear blue sky. ‘They’re out there, somewhere. In space. Waiting. The Doctor always said they’d be back one day.’

‘The Doctor,’ I said quickly, turning to one of the main purposes of my visit. ‘I wanted to ask you about him. Everybody knows about Doctor Smith, of course. He’s almost as much of a legend as you are. But there’s so little documentation. A lot of the eyewitness reports are confusing – he seems to gain or lose a foot in height almost at will. Completely change his appearance. There *is* speculation that “the Doctor” was actually a code name for a *group* of scientists working for UNIT who –’

‘Poppycock!’ the old soldier snapped. ‘You and your theories. You know *nothing*.’

‘Then tell me.’

I glanced up at an approaching nurse who was alarmed by the raised voice. ‘I only want to understand the truth. InterCom, for instance. So much has been written about the Doctor’s involvement, but . . .’

‘Help comes when you need it most,’ he said mysteriously. The old man fell silent for a moment. Then in a hoarse whisper he continued. ‘The Doctor believes in good and fights evil. Though often caught up in violent situations, he is a man of peace. He is never cruel or cowardly. To put it simply, the Doctor is a hero. That, at least, hasn’t changed. And it never will.’

The nurse told me that I should leave. I offered Lethbridge-Stewart my hand.

‘Thank you sir,’ I said. ‘It has been a unique honour.’

But he wasn’t listening. He was looking out of the windows towards the sky again. ‘Wonderful chaps,’ he said. ‘All of them.’

From the introduction to *Watch the Skies: The Not-So-Secret-History of Alien Encounters*

Daniel Clompus (London Multimedia Publishing: 2051)

Second Prologue

Time as an Abstract

Tokyo: 1 July 1999

‘Is everybody ready?’

The eight men in grey suits, masks and dark goggles crowded around the observation window, staring into the inert sterilised environment of the white room. It was, it seemed to several of the group, like looking through the porthole of a spaceship on to another world.

‘Explain the process again, Chung,’ asked one of the men, turning to the Chinese scientist standing behind him. There was a look of detachment on Chung Sen’s pockmarked face as he scribbled a note on a torn scrap of paper, as though the action were vastly more important than the question he had just been asked. Then he set the paper to one side.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘What you are about to witness is the culmination of a three-year search to find someone who, we believe, has the necessary resistance. Switch on the glonthometer,’ he told his female assistant as he moved towards the group.

A former teenage protégé who, along with the Latvian dissident Kerensy, had been considered the world’s leading authority on theoretical time travel, Chung Sen had long ago abandoned his research in this area. Now his Holy Grail was even more within the shuttered realms of science fiction.

Childhood meningitis had left him ugly and misshapen. The fingers of his left hand were shrivelled into a gnarled claw, he had rotten stumps instead of teeth and his chronically short sight gave the impression of a leering, aggressive stare when he talked to people.

‘The quest, as you are aware, is to find DNA that is compatible with the specifications that the conglomerate has laid down. The experiments, both here and in our facilities in California and the Czech Republic, have sadly proved unsuccessful. However, we believe that we are close to the answers that we have all been seeking.’

In the centre of the white room was a chair with leather straps. Two men were leading a shoeless teenage boy dressed in thin blue hospital clothes towards it. He was blindfolded, and clearly drugged, and the pure whiteness

of the room contrasted sharply with his olive-coloured skin and jet-black hair. He stumbled and struggled uselessly against the strong arms of his captors. Something indescribably terrible was about to happen to the boy and he, and everyone else present, knew it.

'Is all this ritualistic nonsense really necessary?' asked a black man in the group. He was tall and angular, a shock of greying hair a stark contrast to his smooth ebony skin. That apart, there was nothing to differentiate him from the rest of the men. All wore the same dull, formulaic business suits. And the same fixed, introspective expressions pitched midway between boredom and a feeling of irrelevance towards everyone but themselves.

Chung, his own features betraying neither of these emotions, was understandably irritated by someone questioning how he did things around here. This was, after all, *his* project. They simply paid for it.

'I'm sorry . . . you are?' he asked contemptuously.

'Theydon Bois. Representative from Burkina Faso,' replied the man.

'It's a valid question,' said Chung with a dismissive tone that suggested he didn't feel it was valid in the slightest. He moved through the group towards the window. Inside the room, the boy had been strapped into the chair by the two men and was now alone. And clearly terrified. 'He is from Tuvalu in the South Pacific. His family has been well paid to forget that he ever even existed,' Chung explained. 'Switch on, Kyla,' he told his assistant excitedly, as he continued to stare through the observation window.

Kyla, a striking young woman with dark hair which she wore in a ponytail, hit the initiation sequence. 'The process takes approximately twenty seconds if all goes according to plan,' Chung continued.

'It's always "if",' said another member of the group, a tall, almost painfully thin Englishman with a handsome, weather-beaten face. He looked as though he had just stepped out of a recruiting poster for the Grenadier guards and had the shiny shoes and ramrod-straight backbone to match.

'Mr Elphistone, yes? We met in Oslo two years ago.'

'I remember,' answered Elphistone. 'And the observation still stands.'

'DNA-extraction is not an exact science,' noted Chung as the space beyond the window began to glow with a brilliant white light. 'Science requires linear certainty from random doubt.'

'What's happening?' asked Bois as the hum of equipment increased.

'The power is building up,' answered Chung. 'Followed by . . .' He paused as the hum became a drone and then a vibration that built and built until it threatened to shake the entire platform to pieces. The light within the white room pulsed, strobed, then exploded in a dazzling sensory rush. The observers, despite the protection they all wore, instantly covered their eyes.

'Disintegration,' concluded Chung, throwing his arms up dramatically as the light faded away.

For several seconds the room continued to vibrate, but gradually the shaking ceased. Chung noticed that he was now holding on to the rail at the edge of the observation platform, and that his knuckles were white. He released his grip, and saw a slight tremor in his deformed hand.

Inside the room, the aluminium straps on the empty chair hung limply in their place.

The boy was gone.

'Particle bombardment,' said Chung with the barest trace of emotion in his voice as he turned back to face the men in suits. 'Atom by atom. Molecule by molecule. The very essence of being condensed into electrons, protons and neutrons flowing through this ...' Chung paused, triumphantly. 'This *breakthrough!*'

The room was silent, until Kyla looked up from her monitor and shook her head, sadly. 'There's no residual trace of any of the nonhumanoid elements we're looking for.'

'Which means?' asked Bois contemptuously.

'Failure,' suggested Elphistone.

Chung Sen looked shattered. The change in his demeanour was almost instantaneous, as if someone had flicked a switch. It was as though too many sleepless nights had suddenly caught up with him. He slumped, dejectedly, into a chair close to the observation window and stared into space. As the others stood around wondering what to say next, Kyla came forward with a clipboard which she pressed into Chung's hands.

'The analysis, Professor. We need to make our conclusions.'

'It should have worked,' replied Chung angrily.

'I know,' acknowledged Kyla. 'But it didn't.'

Chung stared down at the sheet of notes, the foundations of his world falling in rubble around him. It hadn't worked. Snatches of conversation filtered through the haze of shock into which he was sinking.

'I knew this was a mistake. We're wasting our time here,' said Bois.

'But the alternatives,' countered another of the group. 'They are not worth thinking about.'

'At the end of the day, this still represents our only hope,' added Elphistone.

Chung Sen looked up from his notes. 'Time is all I need,' he pleaded. There was a trace of desperation in his voice.

'Time is, ironically, the one thing you don't have,' noted Bois. 'I still doubt that this project is viable.'

'Of course it is,' argued Chung, throwing his notes to the floor. 'It *has* to be.'

'You have no idea if the process is anything other than a theory,' Bois continued.

'I have a question.'

All heads turned to the small man with a French accent who was closest to the observation window. He looked pale and unremarkable in the multinational group, a slightly wan figure with close-set eyes and a very Gallic nose and mouth. But it was noticeable that all of the other members of the group, without exception, deferred to him immediately. As did the scientist. Chung Sen nodded, eagerly, like a dog trying to please its human master.

'Yes, Alain?'

'Have any of the British been questioned?'

Chung snorted, contemptuously. 'The British,' he spat, looking directly at Elphistone, 'are useless.'

'We've talked to some of the dropouts from Project Carnival,' Elphistone said.

'They know *nothing*,' Chung Sen interjected furiously. 'Without Doctor Shaw, Professor Chesterton or Doctor Sutton we're stumbling in the dark.'

'What we need,' said Bois, 'is someone who has interacted with extraterrestrials.'

'Or, better still,' countered another of the group, 'an *actual* extraterrestrial. The whole future of the project depends on it.'

A dull silence passed over the men as the implications of this sank in.

'So,' remarked the Frenchman slowly, 'isn't it about time we found one?'

Part One

All the King's Men

'In the year 1999 and seven months, the Great King of Terror shall come from the skies.'

An extremely bad translation of 'Century X.72' from *The True Prophecies or Prognostications of Michael Nostradamus* first translated by Theophilus de Garencieres (1672).

Chapter One

Yesterday's Men

Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam: 3 July 1999

'I was in a seminar with the surveillance crowd,' said Paynter as he returned from the bar and put the two coffee cups on the smoked-glass table. 'In Redruth after all that palaver with the Cassuragian invasion. *Strange* bunch. They always seem to know more than is good for them. About everything.'

The air was dry and stale with the pungent tinge of body odour and cheap aftershave. Paynter licked his lips, as though the taste of this place was as unpleasant as its coffee. He picked up the cup and took a sip, wincing as the bitter liquid threatened to strip the skin from his throat.

They were an odd couple. Paynter, the bigger, more muscular of the pair, gave the impression of being a stereotypical Northern hard-man with a short temper and the ability to say the most offensive, thoughtless things at the most inappropriate moments. With attitude. Those who knew him tended to conclude that he was a thuggish dinosaur. An all-singing, all-dancing bully and the unacceptable face of new laddism. Or, simply, 'that bastard'. But Geoff Paynter was, nonetheless, beneath the nihilism and the wolf-whistle performances, fiercely loyal to his colleagues and friends. Especially Mark Barrington. Younger than Paynter but perhaps more cynical and worldly-wise Barrington, a wiry, tough man of medium build, had a melancholy depth to him that few could penetrate. And lots of people had tried over the years.

'Example?' asked Barrington.

Paynter instantly forgot about the rank coffee and warmed to his theme. 'One of the Americans. Chap called . . . Do you know, I can't even remember his name now? Bloody nice bloke anyway but, you know, *American*.' Captain Paynter pronounced the last word as though it was the description of something he had just scraped off the sole of his shoe. 'Wanted to tell me his life story. Not just his, his whole family's . . .'

'Yes,' replied Lieutenant Barrington. 'A very confessional race, the Americans. And they're surprised when everyone else isn't.'

'Exactly. That's exactly my point. Lovely people. Give you the shirt off their backs so they would . . . But I hate all that touchy-feely nonsense. Always

telling you what their effing therapist's said. Now, this fellah, he caught me on a bad day. You know what it's like? You're far from home and there's a match on that you can't see because the hotel hasn't got Sky Sports. The drink in the bar is lousy and you've given up ciggies for the third time that month and you'd just kill for a Silk Cut.' Paynter looked down at the cigarette burning slowly towards his fingertips and frowned, stubbing it out in one of the spotless glass ashtrays. Smoke billowed upwards and for a moment a dense choking cloud passed between the two men sitting in the almost deserted airport coffee bar. 'Disgusting habit,' continued Paynter with a bronchial wheeze.

'I get sick of telling you that,' replied Barrington, taking off his spectacles and cleaning them on his handkerchief. 'You take half a minute off your life every time you –'

'So anyway,' interrupted Paynter, irritated by his colleague's much-rehearsed mantra. 'Chap seemed to have taken it upon himself to be my personal saviour. Wanted to give me a dose of "the glass isn't half-empty, it's half-full". Well. I ask you. Pseudo-hippie, tree-hugging crap!'

Barrington nodded in sympathy. 'Laid it on a bit thick, did he?'

'Oh, did he ever? "My grandmother lived to be ninety-six and every day she had a smile on her face." Fair got on my nerves, so he did.'

'What did you say?' asked Barrington.

'I told him about my granddad, actually,' replied Paynter. 'I said. "Listen, mate, my grandfather was born in a tenement slum in Northumberland in 1918, the third of ten kids. He grew up during the Depression, for most of which period his father was out of work so the family lived in poverty. He served his country at Dunkirk and watched his best friend drown. He was a bombardier who lost the hearing in one ear because of the noise of the big guns he worked on, which meant that he couldn't go back to his trade as a welder after the war because he couldn't work at heights. He received no war pension so ended up doing low-paid menial work for the next thirty-odd years whilst trying to raise three sons. And at the age of sixty-three he was thrown on the scrapheap, a symbol of Thatcher's Britain, a man representing an industry and a region reclassified as 'worthless'. Then he developed cancer of the stomach. He died when I was twenty-eight and, do you know something? I *never* saw him smile *once*." That's what I said.'

Paynter paused and spent several fruitless seconds searching his pockets before realising that the stubbed-out cigarette was his last. He crumpled up the empty packet and tossed it on to the table in disgust.

'You've given them up, remember?' stated Barrington. 'So, what did our stateside cousin have to say about that?'

'He asked why,' said Paynter. 'And I told him. "Because he never had a single effing thing worth smiling about, you moron!" That shut him up.'

Barrington began to laugh. When he smiled, his rugged face was a marked contrast to the surly and often aggressive demeanour of Paynter. Soft and likeable. ‘The trouble with those kind of people is that they have no concept that anything exists beyond their own world-view. It’s a real surprise when somebody shows them what it’s like in reality-central. Case in point . . . Do you remember Leah Large?’

Paynter thought for a moment. ‘That incredibly ugly girl from California in transport that you were keen on?’ he asked.

‘Not quite how I’d have put it,’ said Barrington. His smile was replaced, as quickly as it had arrived, by a wounded look. ‘You know, the first time I took her out, we went to that Thai place on Charlotte Street?’

‘I know it. The food’s good.’

Barrington nodded in agreement. ‘I bought her roses. Because I’m a well-brought-up Englishman who does that kind of thing. And, did she appreciate it?’

‘I dunno,’ replied Paynter in his best Homer Simpson-like voice.

‘Rhetorical question,’ Barrington told him sarcastically. Did she *hell?! Spent the whole of the next fortnight complaining about it. About me. About the weather. About the fact that all men are just looking for a bit of acquaintance rape. Then she ditched me for some journalist from Aylesbury with his own fondue set. That almost put me off them for good . . .*

‘Women, or Americans?’

Barrington seemed to be weighing up his options before replying. ‘Fondue sets,’ he said at last.

‘Funny thing to get shirty about,’ noted Paynter with a glance at his watch.

‘Oh absolutely, I agree one hundred per cent. But . . .’ Barrington paused and shrugged. He too looked to his wrist. He frowned and put the watch to his ear. The regular ticking seemed to satisfy him. ‘He’s late.’

Paynter ignored him and clicked his fingers towards the blonde woman behind the bar. She raised her head, slowly, a look of boredom on her face.

‘Yes?’ she asked, with a rich Dutch accent.

‘Another two coffees, love. One black decaf, one white caffeinated with three sugars.’

Paynter found himself watching her as she bent down to pick up a coffee cup; at her long stockinged legs and short, tight, black skirt. She seemed to sense that she was being observed and straightened, pulling at the wrinkled skirt with hands that were just too slow and deliberate for comfort. Paynter chuckled and turned back to his colleague.

‘Saucy minx!’ Paynter paused, amused that Barrington was still brooding. ‘English sensibilities, mate. Too much Nick Hornby. Too many hours on your own with your Clash collection.’

'Always *hated* them,' said Barrington with a sly grin.

'Do you know, they speak highly of you too?' noted Paynter as the waitress approached with the coffees. 'I was talking to Joe Strummer only the other day about you. He said, "Do you know what's wrong with that Mark Barrington, Geoff?" I said. "Yes Joe, he needs a good woman to sort him out."' The waitress set the cups on the table and turned to Paynter who pulled a twenty-five guilder note from his elegant leather wallet and handed it to her. 'You have nothing smaller, yes?' she asked.

'I'm afraid that's the only size they're made in,' replied Paynter with a look of insolent delight. A sullen expression crossed the waitress's face as she plucked the note from his hand without further comment.

'Funny country this you know?' said Barrington. 'Even the money looks like it was designed by someone on drugs.' He nodded towards the swirling splash of pink-purple colouring on the note as it disappeared into the bar till. 'We haven't paid for the first round yet,' he noted after the change had arrived.

Paynter thought for a moment. 'You're right. That guy went off duty. He doesn't seem to have told Queen Beatrix over there that we owe her a debt.' He winked broadly at Barrington. 'Tell you what, if Interpol come looking for us we just wave this and claim diplomatic immunity.' He thrust his security pass towards Barrington's face. 'We're the *Force*, son, and we ain't had our breakfast!'

Barrington slipped out of his tan suede jacket, placing it over the back of the metal-and-plastic seat. Before him, over the balcony beyond, lay the sprawling terminals of Schiphol airport. He dug two fingers into the tight breast pocket of his electric-blue shirt and removed a collection of banknotes held together with a money clip. 'I'll get the next one, skipper.'

'Innit marvellous!' said Paynter, running a hand over his chin to find a day's growth of stubble had suddenly sprouted. 'My old dad was a bit of a card. Actually, if truth be told, he was a boorish, misogynistic bigot. But he knew a thing or two about the ways of the world.' He swept a hand out, indicating the scurrying insect-like humanity beneath them on the airport concourse. Arrivals and departures. 'You take Johnny Foreigner, here ...'

'Oh God, here we go again,' said Barrington. 'This is going to be another example of Paynter's First Law of National Stereotyping, isn't it?'

'No, no, no!' said Paynter in an embarrassed, rapid staccato. 'I'm just saying that your average foreign national can have his behaviour quite easily predicted.'

Barrington had heard it all before. Many times. 'This being the cue for a series of obvious, one-line observations on the national characteristics of everyone who wasn't born in the United Kingdom?'

'That's a bit cynical,' said Paynter, mock-hurt in his voice.

‘Italians?’ Barrington asked quickly.

‘I’m sorry?’

Barrington repeated himself. ‘Italians. National characteristics?’

Paynter had taken the offered bait. ‘I can see where you’re going with this, Mark,’ he noted. Hook, line and sinker, seemingly. ‘It’s about perception, isn’t it? I’m a soldier, I see the world as one big war zone. It doesn’t mean I’m a bad person!’

‘Italians?’ Barrington asked again with a lavish smile of victory.

‘They’re greasy and cowardly,’ said Paynter in irritation. ‘And lousy drivers . . .! And the French talk loudly in restaurants. And the Germans are arrogant . . .’

‘I thought you’d have saved that one for the Americans.’

Paynter, though, was having none of it. ‘Nah. Yanks are flash, aren’t they? Have wealth, will flaunt it. They don’t have a class culture over there, they have a money culture.’

‘The Dutch . . .?’

The voice that cut through the static in Barrington’s earpiece was crisp and matter-of-fact. Military. ‘Greyhound to Trap Five.’

‘Acknowledged,’ answered Barrington into his tiny, unobtrusive tie-dip microphone.

‘Target on the move,’ said the voice. ‘Heading your way.’

Paynter sat bolt upright, his eyebrows arching. ‘Action?’

‘Could be,’ replied Barrington, nodding towards the concourse below them.

Paynter adjusted his spectacles, turning a wheel where the frames met the sidepieces to operate a zoom lens that was built into the glasses for just this kind of operation. For a second his world was out of focus, a series of blurred, jerky movements.

And then, behold, clarity.

‘Got him,’ said Paynter, half-standing at the table. Barrington followed his colleague’s gaze and he too had the man in his sight.

‘Affirmative. Trap Five to Greyhound. Contact has been established. Target is heading for the departure lounge.’ Barrington fumbled for the flight bag at his feet, never taking his eyes from the man below them. ‘I’ll go down. You keep an eye on things till I have him in range then join me.’

‘Get on your bike,’ said Paynter, with a tiny finger salute.

The man wore faded denim jeans and a lightweight brown leather jacket that was scuffed and had clearly seen better days. Though he was powerfully built around the shoulders, he looked completely innocuous even when carrying a metallic photographer’s briefcase. Barrington slipped into step a dozen paces

behind him, his eyes doing a rapid back and forth between the case and the departing frame of his quarry.

'He's hardly making it difficult,' he whispered and was rewarded with another burst of static in his ear. This time it was Paynter and he was massively out of breath.

'I'm on the move, Mark, talk to me.'

'Target in range. He's got the merchandise. You *really* need to get some exercise!'

Barrington could hear Paynter continuing to pant as he took three steps at a time down the escalator to the concourse. 'Who's dealt with customs?' the captain gasped.

'Sergeant Hill,' whispered Barrington as he reached a corner. He ignored the strange look he received from an elderly woman browsing through the airport fiction and alarmed by the sight of a man talking to himself, and allowed his subject to increase the distance between them before setting off in pursuit. 'He's heading for the departure lounge. F7.'

'I'm right behind you. I've got him in visual.'

Paynter appeared at Barrington's left shoulder and the pair fell into a brooding silence as they approached the entrance to the lounge.

'There's Hilly,' noted Paynter as he made eye contact with a man with thinning ginger hair and a bushy moustache. In his dirty trench coat and scuffed shoes, pretending to read a copy of the *Daily Mirror*, Hill looked exactly what he was: a soldier in a military version of civilian clothes. Paynter winced at such an incompetent interpretation of 'undercover'.

Barrington, on the other hand, gave Hill barely a glance as he watched the man with the briefcase move without delay through the security check and disappear beyond a canvas exit towards KLM Flight 601 to Los Angeles.

'Everything in order, sirs?' asked Hill, joining Barrington and Paynter in the rapidly emptying lounge.

'Sweet as a nut,' said Paynter, signing a carbonised order paper that Hill produced from inside his coat. 'Target is Sergi Bulyjin, citizen of the Ukraine, subject of surveillance order 1745, genetic fingerprints on file already. Tagged in Berlin this morning, and really clocking up the air miles today. Any bother with the clogheads?'

'No sir,' said Hill. 'The security staff near enough wet themselves when I showed them my pass. You'd have thought God himself had just walked in!'

Barrington adjusted the shoulder strap on his flight bag. 'That's the power of the United Nations, Sergeant,' he noted as he accepted the tickets that Hill offered him. 'Right then, let's get boarded. Can't say I'm looking forward to this.'

‘What’s that sir?’ asked Hill.

‘A ten-and-a-half-hour flight, Sergeant. Worse than alien invasions by far!’

‘You ever been to America before?’

‘No,’ said Barrington. ‘I’ve been to the UNIT field operations centre in Derbyshire. They have a full working model of “It’s a Small World”.’

‘I know,’ replied Paynter. ‘It’s terrifying. We’ve all got our little idiosyncrasies, but they take things to extremes up there, know what I mean?’ The contrast between the cramped Fokker 100 that had brought them from England, and the huge 747 could hardly have been greater. Paynter wiped the condensation from the window and stared at the clouds outside. ‘Think yourself lucky, matey. First time I was over there the flight was delayed and they lost my luggage. Spent three days walking around in the same underwear.’

Barrington ignored Paynter’s scatological humour. ‘What’s the in-flight movie?’

‘*Tomorrow Never Dies*,’ replied Paynter with a sarcastic sneer.

‘Typical,’ said Barrington. ‘Even in a metal tank six miles high you can’t get away from the day job!’ He found himself looking down the aisle to where Bulyjin sat apparently asleep, his jacket turned into a makeshift blanket. Above him in the baggage compartment was the metallic briefcase containing enough plutonium to blow the plane into orbit.

James Bond ... Pfft. Lightweight! Put *him* in a jeep next to a sixty-foot robot and he’d be shaken not stirred!

Barrington seemed impressed. ‘You go back all the way to the giant robot?’ he asked. ‘I never knew you were that old!’

Paynter ignored the sarcasm. ‘My first gig. I was seventeen and straight out of basic. Big sweat that, shooters and everything. My bottle was twitching, I can tell you. John Benton told me to expect the unexpected. You know what’s the only thing that’s kept me sane for the last twenty years?’

‘The wages?’

‘No. Sitting down to watch a spy film and laughing at all the inaccuracies!’

‘What’s the alternative?’ asked Barrington. ‘Do you want to be a spaceman?’

The suggestion was not quite as ridiculous as it sounded. ‘Actually, I *did* when I was six,’ Paynter replied cheerfully. ‘Space travel’s in my blood.’ It was, too. His father had worked with the British Rocket Group in the Seventies on the Neptune missions.

If Barrington was surprised by this revelation, he didn’t show it. ‘What with the Chinese throwing up a rocket every six minutes, and all that work NASA are doing for private companies, there’s a lot of it about.’

‘Space tourism’ll be the next thing,’ Paynter said, folding up his crumpled copy of the in-flight magazine. ‘Five years, maybe less, we’ll have charter

flights into space.'

There was a period of silence as the film began, which was only broken when Barrington dug his partner in the ribs with his elbow. 'Hey look at this,' he said, holding up the US immigration form.

'You have to fill one in before they'll let you into the land of the free. It's the law,' said Paynter.

'Have you ever read the questions on the back?'

'No,' replied Paynter. 'I just tick "no" to everything ...'

'Then check out number three!'

Paynter found the object of his partner's amazement. "'Have you ever been involved in espionage; or sabotage; or in terrorist activity; or genocide?'" he read aloud.

Barrington and Paynter began to laugh. Softly at first. Then hysterically.

They were still laughing six hours later when the plane touched down at Los Angeles International Airport.

Chapter Two

Safe European Home

‘Someone once said, “If you are tired of London, you are tired of life”.’

‘I’ll bet *they* never had to suffer a breakdown on the Northern Line in the middle of a heat wave, whoever they were,’ noted Tegan spikily.

They walked through the crowds on Oxford Street almost oblivious to the bustle and mayhem going on around them. As motorbikes weaved through the black taxis and red London buses, the couple barely seemed to raise their voices above a whisper despite the cacophony.

When you’ve stared death in the face on other worlds, thought Tegan, a Saturday afternoon in the busiest shopping street in Europe is a piece of cake in comparison.

‘Hmm . . . ? Sorry, I was trying to remember who *did* say it,’ noted the Doctor absent-mindedly. ‘It’ll come to me. Eventually.’

There was something delightfully English about the Doctor’s eccentric clothes. An Edwardian cricketing costume that could have slipped from the pages of Kipling; candy-striped trousers and a beige frock coat with a sprig of celery pinned to one lapel. Many had thought about asking him why it was there. Few actually had.

He was of slender build, willowy and athletic. He had a sweet young face, pleasant and open with high cheekbones, topped by a neat head of corn-blond hair. He possessed little of the flamboyant charisma of some of his predecessors, which made him, in the eyes of individuals obsessed with such aesthetics, bland and ordinary. Yet when he smiled in his charmingly boyish way, and the glint of the sun caught his eyes, there was something impossibly ancient about him.

Something eternal.

‘If you say so.’ Tegan scowled as she passed a hand across her brow. She squinted up at the sun and sighed deeply. ‘I hate this place in summer. The air’s so bad you can hardly breathe, it’s always gridlocked and it needs a population transplant!’

Typical Tegan, thought the Doctor. As subtle as a flying sledgehammer.

The Australian girl’s short, rainbow summer dress, a stunning contrast to her dark auburn hair, was a vivid overpowering splash of multicolour in this

most mundane of settings, cutting through the hot, smoggy air like a lighthouse beacon.

'Never mind,' said the Doctor encouragingly as they found a seat outside the tube station. 'We'll only be here for a few hours. I have to meet someone.'

'Who?'

'Whom,' corrected the Doctor.

Tegan tutted loudly at his pedantry. 'Whatever.'

'I don't know,' the Doctor said, pulling a rolled-up copy of the *New Scientist* from his frock-coat pocket and handing it to Tegan. 'Page seventy-three'.

She opened the magazine and stared at a page of personal ads.

'Column three, fourth one down,' the Doctor said helpfully.

*Someone in search of his Doctor.
Requires REGENERATIVE qualities.
ANY accepted.
The National Portrait Gallery. July 3rd. Noon.*

'That's a bit cryptic,' noted Tegan, handing the magazine back.

'I think that's the general idea,' replied the Doctor with a grin.

'Could it be a trap?'

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders and looked uninterested. 'It's possible, I suppose,' he answered truthfully. 'But I doubt it. The cost of the advert alone. Not one of my mortal enemies would pay thirteen pounds and twenty-five pence to ensure my death. Not even the Master.'

'Very funny,' said Tegan looking around at the milling crowd of tourists and shoppers. 'You want me to come along?' she asked.

'No. There's no sense in putting you in danger as well.'

'But I thought ...'

'I wasn't being entirely serious, Tegan,' noted the Doctor with another little grin. 'Besides, I told Turlough you'd meet him by the Centre Point fountain.'

Tegan could feel herself getting annoyed. It was the weather, clearly. 'Where's he gone, anyway?'

'To see an old friend, apparently. A solicitor in Chancery Lane.' There the conversation seemed to come to a full stop. As dead as Christmas on 27 December.

'Oh,' the girl replied with little interest. She knew that she should really try harder where Turlough was concerned, but he made casual conversation so difficult. 'Where do you want us to meet up with you then?' she asked the Doctor.

‘The usual place. Don’t be late.’

And with that he was gone at a brisk pace, into the heaving crowds down the Charing Cross Road.

‘Last time it was the Tate Gallery, I remember,’ said the Doctor brightly, taking a bite from an apple as he sensed a presence behind him. ‘Why the change of venue?’

‘Sorry, Doctor, but I have a low tolerance threshold for the life and works of Joseph Turner. Even if he was a personal friend of yours!’

The Doctor spun round, a beaming smile on his face. ‘Brigadier!’ he cried, and then blushed at the loudness of his voice in this normally hushed place. A few heads turned in his direction from further down the gallery and then, realising that a man shouting was none of their business, turned away again.

‘I was worried you wouldn’t see my message for decades.’

‘I didn’t,’ replied the Doctor.

Age suits certain men. There comes with it a dignity and elegance. Clothes become sharper and reflect a history of sartorial taste suddenly freed from the oppression of fashion statements. The hair is tinged with silver and the face turns rugged and weather-beaten which, for some reason, really seems to impress the ladies. That had all happened to Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart ten years ago. Now he just looked like Stewart Granger.

Handsome.

‘Oh, it’s *you*,’ Lethbridge-Stewart noted, with perhaps a touch of disappointment in his voice. ‘I was wondering which one of you would turn up. Random factors, I expect?’

‘There’s nothing random about the universe,’ the Doctor said brightly, moving past the Brigadier to look closely at a portrait of Edward VIII. ‘For instance, I *know* this is a forgery. I suspect the gallery does too, but they still hang it because nobody who comes here really cares. The fact that it’s not genuine doesn’t detract from its beauty.’

‘That’s one way of looking at it.’

‘Perception, however,’ continued the Doctor, dumping his half-eaten apple into the Brigadier’s hand, ‘is random. Shall we walk?’

The day had become even hotter and more humid as the Doctor and Lethbridge-Stewart wandered through a crowded Trafalgar Square.

‘I love London,’ said the Doctor. ‘So . . .’

‘Busy?’ asked the Brigadier. ‘The place *I* love is nowhere near here.’

The Doctor cast a curious glance at his old friend. ‘You’ve changed a great deal,’ he said simply.

'As have you,' replied the Brigadier. 'I encountered one of your successors a few weeks ago.'

The Doctor wagged a finger. 'Brigadier, you know the rules. The future is an open book to me . . . How many have you worked with now? Just out of curiosity!'

'Nine.'

'Interesting. I bumped into one of them myself some time ago. Curious little chap.'

'What have you been up to recently?' asked the Brigadier as the pair found an empty bench.

The square was an oasis of calm in the blur of modern London. A few tired-looking pigeons fluttered around them and the Brigadier pulled the remains of a cheese sandwich from his overcoat pocket and tossed a handful of crumbs in their direction. The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'My lunch.' explained Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Forgot I hadn't finished it. The birds' need is greater than mine.'

'For the last month,' began the Doctor with an ambiguous smile, 'I've been trying to get a young chap back home to 1643. And what a right how-do-you-do *that* turned into. We were on a planet populated by walking reptiles, very intelligent but warlike, don't you know? The ruler wanted to execute me. I told him he couldn't do that and he said "Doctor, I am the Lizard King, I can do *anything*".' The Doctor paused, delving into one of his numerous pockets. 'Before that, I saved a village in the West Country from annihilation by blowing up the church and destroying an alien representation of the devil. Sound familiar?'

'Terrifyingly,' noted the Brigadier drily as the Doctor finally found what he was looking for and pulled out a small package wrapped in brown paper and string which he handed to his old friend.

Inside, the Brigadier found a thin leather-bound volume.

'It's *The Revolt of Islam*. A first edition, signed by the author. I know how much you adore Shelley so I thought . . .'

The Brigadier seemed genuinely touched and stammered a 'thank you', but he was spared any further embarrassment by a bleeping sound from within his jacket. 'Excuse me,' he said, removing the mobile phone. 'Lethbridge-Stewart. Yes? Yes, I'm with him now. The . . .'

he looked at the Doctor, quizzically.

'Fifth.' His companion answered the unasked question.

'Fifth,' continued the Brigadier. 'I *know* you haven't met him yet. He's very nice.' He rolled his eyes upwards in exasperation. 'I'll be home around six. Yes. Yes, I love you too.' He disconnected and tutted. 'Infernal machine. Don't know why I carry it.'

'Doris?'

‘She asked me to give you her regards.’

This amused the Doctor. ‘She’s a good woman.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the Brigadier absent-mindedly. ‘She is.’ He threw the last of the bread to the pigeons and brushed the crumbs from his trousers. ‘You will be wondering why I called you here, today?’

The Doctor shook his head expressively. ‘Actually, I’m more interested in why you’re out of uniform. The last time we met you were retired. I take it . . .’

‘Things change,’ said the Brigadier, returning to the Doctor’s theme of a few moments earlier. ‘You, of all people, should know that.’

‘Indeed.’

‘I rejoined UNIT over two years ago in an advisory capacity. A sort of all-purpose consultant. To be honest I think they keep me around because the pension would be too expensive. I’ve got a small team working from an office in Covent Garden. I’m trying to get back to the original UNIT ethic. Investigating the unexplained, the unusual. Trying to stop alien invasions before they land on top of Nelson’s Column and betray their ignorance of how this world works by asking to be taken to our leaders.’

The Doctor was clearly impressed. ‘That’s wonderfully proactive of you, Brigadier,’ he said. ‘My influence?’

‘Perhaps,’ noted Lethbridge-Stewart with a rare smile. ‘If you like, my group is UNIT’s *X-Files*.’

‘I’m sorry?’

It was Lethbridge-Stewart’s turn to offer an apologetic shake of the head. ‘It’s a television programme, apparently. Quite popular with the chaps in the section. I’ve never watched it myself, but they tell me it’s very good. The point is, I can more or less do what I want, investigate who I want. The downside is that resources are limited.’

‘Hence me?’ asked the Doctor.

‘If I need to bring in an expert,’ admitted the Brigadier with irritation in his voice, ‘it has to be one that doesn’t require an expense account. Someone who can run the gauntlet as it were.’

‘Strange idiom,’ noted the Doctor. ‘I’ve never fully understood its origin.’ He paused. ‘I don’t wish to be indelicate, but aren’t you getting a little . . .’

‘I’m seventy-one this year,’ answered the Brigadier quickly. ‘You know what they say about old soldiers?’

The Doctor was ashamed of his uncharacteristically bad manners. ‘I apologise. I, myself, am hardly a spring chicken!’

‘I was going to make that very observation. Doctor,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart, caustically. ‘Appearances, as you are aware, can be very deceptive.’

Which, in a way, brings me to the point.’ He produced a blurry surveillance photograph and passed it to the Time Lord. ‘Do you recognise this man?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor after a moment. ‘Should I?’

‘His name is Paolo Sanger,’ began the Brigadier. ‘Italian-American. Thirty-nine years old according to his publicity people, although we’ve been unable to find documentary evidence that he even existed before 1982. He’s a billionaire, the head of a company called International Communications. It’s a multinational conglomerate that has its fingers in a dozen media. Publishing, broadcasting and communications networks, that kind of thing. Over the last few years he’s been able to circumvent many national laws on copyright by using that blasted Internet contraption to push copyrighted material into territories where these laws don’t apply. It’s estimated that InterCom may destroy the television and newspaper industries within the next decade.’

‘This is a *bad* thing?’ asked the Doctor.

‘I agree, it isn’t my real concern,’ noted Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘What I am interested in is a titbit of information that came our way via MI6. It seems that Sanger’s organisation is buying large quantities of high-grade plutonium from Third World sources, mostly in the former USSR. He has enough to blow up the world ten times over.’

A sarcastic tone could be detected in the Doctor’s voice as he said, ‘Once would be quite enough.’

‘Well, exactly. What could a man possibly want with that much plutonium?’

‘Maybe he’s building a time machine,’ ventured the Doctor. Then he shook his head at Lethbridge-Stewart’s startled reaction. ‘It was a joke, Brigadier. Possibly he doesn’t want to destroy the world so much as change it.’

The Brigadier stood up and offered his hand to the Doctor. ‘Change seems to be on everyone’s mind today,’ he noted. ‘I’ll leave the theorising to you. I’ve already sent two of my best men to California to find out what Sanger is up to, but I’d like your help.’

‘What can I do that your crack agents can’t?’ asked the Doctor.

‘With you,’ said the Brigadier, ‘it’s like throwing a lighted match into a box full of fireworks. Something’s bound to happen.’

The Doctor understood. ‘In times of change,’ he said, standing up to leave, ‘learners will inherit the earth, whilst the learned can find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists. I’ll be in Los Angeles when you need me.’

Turlough returned with a bloodied swollen nose and a smile on his face. Tegan knew better than to ask too many questions. But, as they sat by the Thames on the terrace of a small tavern in Putney where the Doctor always seemed to take them whenever they were in London, a conversation of sorts began.

As usual, it didn't last long because trying to read Turlough was like trying to read another language. But snippets of information did occasionally surface. In Little Hodcombe during three weeks of exploring the Dorset countryside on their own. Tegan had learned from a chance remark that Turlough's mother was dead. She had died when he was young and, he said, he hadn't seen the rest of his family in a long time. So, she began to tell him about her own.

A sick and wan-looking sun was seemingly trying to decide whether to stay in view for another few minutes, or just crawl off behind the horizon and hope that no one would notice. 'You've never mentioned your childhood much before,' said Turlough cautiously. This idea of small talk was obviously as alien as Earth to him.

There was always something shifty and furtive about Turlough, even when he was trying to be supportive. It was possibly the omnipresent school uniform. Tegan had often meant to ask him why he constantly needed to be reminded of a place that he made no bones about hating so much. (It was the equivalent, she thought, of her touring the universe with her own loathed gymslip reminding her of an unhappy childhood. No. Thank. You.) But, as with many aspects of their lives (the Doctor's celery, for one), there just never seemed to be the time to ask the obvious questions.

Thin-faced, with short, cropped, copper-coloured hair and a cruel glance when his mood supported it, Turlough was a complete enigma. He could have been the school bully or the school sneak. Which made the Doctor's friendship with him all the more puzzling.

'Not much to tell,' Tegan said, taking a sip of her vodka and orange. The ice in the glass caught a loose filling and made her wince with an accompanying sharp intake of breath. Typical suburban small-town Aussie nightmare. You ever heard of Caloundra?'

'No.'

'Exactly. Population forty thousand. Not including the sheep. Seventy miles from Brisbane, but it might as well have been seventy million . . .'

'You felt trapped?'

Tegan was slightly suspicious of the question, but answered it anyway. 'I didn't know any different. To tell you the truth, I wasn't a very bright kid. I was always the one that would take the blame for others because I wasn't smart enough to think up my own excuses. The girl who lived next door, Felicity Spoonsy, "my best friend", got me more hidings than enough by making sure that I always had a fag in my mouth. I was a *weird* kid. When I was thirteen, I made a deal with God that I'd be good if he would kill my mad old cow of a grandmother. Six weeks later she died from a coronary thrombosis. But I couldn't get a boyfriend for love nor money.'

Turlough raised his eyebrows.

Tegan, meanwhile, was running her wet finger around the lip of her glass, making it squeal with rage. 'In the metaphorical sense,' she continued, 'Flis had, like, all of her claws into the only boy I fancied, Gary Lovarik, so I resigned from the human race.'

If Turlough felt a little trapped by the conversation he didn't appear able to think of a suitable excuse to end it. 'Go on,' he said.

'Dad had an affair with a twenty-year-old bimbo from the typing pool. There was a bit of a scandal in a kind of small-town way and we moved up the coast. My mother *hated* me and I got sent to boarding school. Well, you know what it's like?'

'Yes,' said Turlough with genuine sympathy. 'I do.'

'I lasted a couple of terms there before I got expelled. When I was fifteen, I ran away to Sydney and squatted in Kings Cross till dad caught up with me and parcelled me off to live with his sister in England. If that hadn't happened, I'd probably have ended up on the streets.'

'But why an air hostess for goodness sake?'

Tegan shrugged. 'It seemed like a glamorous life style? And besides, I wasn't smart enough to be a brain surgeon!'

'Ah, there you are,' said the Doctor wandering past his young companions and leaning on a rail overlooking the Thames. The sun had finally given up the ghost and set, leaving the river to catch its dying twilight rays. 'I love London, don't you?' he asked no one in particular.

'You're alive, so presumably it wasn't a trap,' said Tegan.

'No. It was a *job*.'

'From the Time Lords?'

'Hardly.' The Doctor spun round and tapped Turlough on the shoulder. 'Nice to see you back in one piece. Have either of you ever been to America?'

'No,' said Tegan.

'Me neither,' added Turlough. 'Why?'

The Doctor had that abstracted look on his face. The look that he always seemed to get just before they landed somewhere new. If Tegan hadn't known him and his attitude to life (in all its forms) better she would have equated it with some kind of thrill-seeking, as though the prospect of walking blindly into dangerous and life-threatening situations gave him an enormous kick.

'Travel broadens the mind,' noted the Doctor. 'I'll explain on the way.'

Chapter Three

Kill Surf City

‘OK, we’ve checked your credentials. It appears that you guys are more or less who you say you are. You can go now,’ said the FBI special agent who, Barrington thought, looked like a dead ringer for Harry Kim out of *Voyager*.

As an apology, it left a lot to be desired.

‘About bloody time,’ shouted Paynter angrily, standing in the cramped interview room and picking up his hand luggage from the table. ‘Perhaps you’d be good enough to give me a detailed list of the names of everybody involved in this cockup – *particularly* that sadist from immigration who did the rectal cavity search – so that when I get back to UNIT we can do the official complaint thing and make sure that you all get the effing sack?’

Agent ‘Harry’ pushed Paynter and Barrington’s UNIT passes across the desk. ‘I’m sorry that you feel that way, sir,’ he said. ‘We’re only doing our job. But if you’d told us earlier that you were working for the UN and only *acting* like a pair of soccer hooligan scum –’

‘I ought to punch your ruddy lights out, son,’ roared Paynter. ‘For one thing, right, what’s the point of being in a covert undercover organisation if you go around telling everybody who you are? And for another, it’s *football*, not soccer.’

‘Bit of a sore point with him I’m afraid,’ said Barrington, quietly. ‘The football bit. He’s been known to rip out a geezer’s rib cage and play “Come and Have a Go If You Think You’re Hard Enough” on it over less.’

‘The door is there, gentlemen,’ said ‘Harry’.

Barrington stood up and left but Paynter remained where he was, watching the agent closely, like a snake hypnotising its prey. ‘Have fun lining up at the welfare on Monday, pal,’ he said as he followed his partner, muttering ‘*Americans!*’

‘You really ought to think about aggression control sessions,’ said Barrington as they walked through the now deserted customs hall.

An hour earlier it had been chaos and they had lost Bulyjin in the seething mass of humanity. Delay had followed delay and finally Paynter had snapped and threatened a hapless immigration official with a display of manic ultraviolence if they didn’t ‘get a move on’. That was when the FBI became involved.

'You've got to admit they did have a point,' Barrington continued as the pair found their suitcases standing alone, sorry and neglected at the far end of the airport carousel. 'And you didn't have to stick one on the poor lad doing your body search.'

Paynter gave Barrington a mean, corner-of-the-eye glance as he picked up his luggage. 'Not another word about that incident. *Ever*,' he ordered between gritted teeth.

'You get road rage too. Like that time on the M3, I thought you were going to ram that guy in the Citroen. Gobsmacked, I was ...'

'You're pushing your luck, Lieutenant,' said Paynter as they reached the exit to Terminal Two. 'I've already chinned one annoying runt today, are you looking for an encore?'

In the concrete tunnel that separated the airport terminal from the street outside, they looked bedraggled standing by the glass frontage. For several minutes they waited, unsure of exactly what to do next, until a Taurus screamed up at high speed and a man with sunglasses and a charming smile threw open the passenger door.

'Hi,' he said brightly. 'You must be Lennon and McCartney? Welcome to America!'

His name was Mel Tyrone, and he was the head of UNIT's Los Angeles office. They liked him instantly.

'You'd think that in the fourth biggest city in the world they'd give me more than a secretary and a sergeant, but there you go. I hear London's not what it was either. So, you guys had a few problems with the Feds?'

'You could say that,' said Paynter as the car pulled up at a junction. 'Is it true that you can turn right through a red light over here?'

'Yeah, in this county anyway,' replied Tyrone, doing just that.

Paynter gave Barrington a wicked grin that seemed to say 'I told you they were flash'. 'So, where are you taking us?'

'I thought I'd get you settled into the safe house first, let you get your bearings. Have you eaten yet?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' said Barrington eagerly. 'You know what in-flight food is like? I'm starving.'

Tyrone seemed pleased. 'Me too. There's a decent Thai place in Sherman Oaks near the safe house.'

'Thai has a few bad associations for me I'm afraid,' replied Barrington quickly. 'A burger joint'd be fine.'

Tyrone seemed agreeable. 'I know a place in the valley that we often use. The manager's very discreet.'

* * *

‘This is the first time I’ve eaten beef in five years,’ said Barrington as his knife sawed easily through a beautiful thick sirloin steak, medium rare and garnished with garlic butter. ‘It tastes *great*.’

‘We keep hearing about all of your mad cows over there. Any truth in it?’

They were both fascinated by Tyrone. A tall black man in his early forties with a studious, intelligent face that reminded both Barrington and Paynter of Denzel Washington’s portrayal of Malcolm X. Or of third singer from the right in the Temptations. These impressions of aloofness were shattered, however, by the man’s seemingly sincere interest in what they had to say. About everything. In London they had been briefed to expect a ‘nice guy’. Instead they had found a friend.

Barrington pointed his fork at Paynter. ‘He doesn’t think so,’ he said. ‘He’s always in that Burger King on Tottenham Court Road.’

‘Purely for the onion rings,’ interrupted Paynter defensively. ‘To die for,’ he told Tyrone, who nodded in agreement. The captain returned his attention to the menu, aware that Barrington was already into his main course whilst he was merely nibbling at an appetiser and trying to decide if he *really* wanted to order something called ‘Moons Over My Hammy’.

‘The wife of a mate of mine is a doctor,’ continued Barrington. ‘She told me that about six or seven years ago all the neurologists at her hospital quit eating English beef more or less simultaneously. Now, to my way of thinking, if a brain surgeon reckons some doodah’s bad for you, I’m prepared to accept their judgement!’

The restaurant was virtually empty and the three men had been given a corner booth at the far end of the room with a clear view of the door and the approaches to it. ‘So, what do you think of this place?’ asked Tyrone.

‘Nice,’ spat Paynter through a mouthful of barbecued sparerib. ‘Very civilised!’

‘Sorry about the safe house. It’s not ideal. We ought to get it feng shui’d.’

‘Are you kidding?’ said Barrington. ‘It’s like a palace. It’s even got a pool!’

‘Everybody’s got a swimming pool in LA,’ argued Paynter. ‘It’s the law!’

‘It’s fine, Mel,’ noted Barrington. ‘But I *am* disappointed that the video of the filming at InterCom’s European headquarters in Luxembourg doesn’t work on that VCR. So much for UNIT efficiency!’

‘Not to worry,’ answered Tyrone. ‘I’ve already arranged a PAL/NTSC conversion to be done overnight back at the factory.’

A waitress arrived at the table and the men fell silent as she quickly refilled their cups of coffee. When she had retreated to the safety of the kitchens, Paynter emptied his cup with one gulp.

‘You’re a brave man,’ said Tyrone. ‘The coffee here is terrible, unlike the food.’

'I know,' replied Paynter. 'But I like being wired. Keeps me sharp. It's saved my life more than once.' He yawned loudly, then checked his watch. 'It's six in the morning London time. I'd just be getting up to go down the gym!'

Barrington pushed his plate away, as he also stifled a yawn. Jet lag was beginning to affect both of them. 'To business,' he said hoping that some work would keep him awake. 'What do we know about Sanger's organisation?'

'Pretty much what their publicity department tells us,' noted Tyrone. 'They've got a guy called Joyce who does most of the talking. We've code-named him Goebbels! Looks a bit like him too.' He placed a small black-and-white surveillance photo on the table. 'Most of the heavy stuff seems to be the responsibility of this man,' he said. 'Shaun Ryman. He is one evil mother, of the been there, done that, killed it variety . . . know what I'm saying here?'

'He's the trigger man?' asked Paynter.

Tyrone nodded quickly. 'That's our best guess. He specialises in gruesome murders. People are scared and in that climate it's difficult to get any information other than rumour and hearsay.'

'What about Sanger himself?' asked Barrington.

'Untouchable. We've tried sex scandals, working with the competition, even bumping him off – nothing seems to work. The guy's fireproof, he can't be compromised.'

'There's no such word as "can't",' said Paynter with a wicked grin. 'We'll just have to work around him until we find a weak spot then, WHAM!', he smacked his left fist noisily into his right palm. 'Sorted!'

'You wanted to see me?'

Ryman entered the immense boardroom and walked past the fifty-seat conference table to the desk beyond. Behind it, with his back to the door, sat Paolo Sanger, gazing out of the huge panoramic window that overlooked Studio City and the metropolis beyond.

He often did this, summoning up images of a spider and a giant web. Ryman found it very disquieting.

'You know sometimes when I arrive back here late at night, and all I can see are the lights of the city, I wonder about all of the people out there. They don't have a clue what the future holds.'

'Neither do we if the DNA experiments don't make some progress soon,' Ryman noted.

Sanger turned in his chair. He was immaculately dressed in a light grey business suit and red silk tie. He pressed the intercom button.

'Michelle, could you come in here?' He turned his attention to Ryman. 'We knew the risks when we came here. We knew it wasn't going to be easy. But this still represents our best opportunity. View it as a challenge!'

‘Sure,’ said Ryman. He was powerfully built with a thick, bullish neck and short cropped hair. He had a livid red scar on his left cheek and a prizefighter’s nose that had taken one punch too many, yet his movements were light and graceful, almost balletic. He sat in the chair opposite Sanger without being asked and turned his head as the door opened and Michelle Stonebringer walked towards them with a green folder-file in her hand.

She was a small woman in her late twenties, slightly overweight around the hips and thighs, and power-dressed in a tightly fitting, dark blue jacket and skirt combination that emphasised rather than hid her weight. The cut of her ash-blonde hair was as severe as her clothes and her eyes looked like two chips of ice in the dull lighting of the conference room.

‘Tell him,’ said Sanger as she arrived at the desk. Michelle turned and smiled at Ryman who noticeably failed to return the compliment.

‘He’s arrived,’ she said, adjusting her spectacles. ‘An hour ago at LAX.’

‘The fool,’ shouted Ryman, half-standing. ‘I told Bulyjin to come in through one of the municipal airports. Did the FBI get him?’

‘No,’ said Sanger, his passive expression unchanging. ‘I understand that there was an incident as he arrived but that he was not involved.’

Ryman was visibly relieved. ‘That could have endangered the entire project,’ he noted angrily.

‘I agree. Michelle,’ continued Sanger, ‘make sure that our friend is taken care of. And that he has no problems with any political factors during his visit. He is our guest after all.’

‘Political?’ asked Stonebringer.

‘International politics.’ Sanger nodded his head and his personal assistant turned and left the room quickly. ‘We can deal with potential consequences later. I’ll leave that in your capable hands,’ he told Ryman. ‘For now, I want the plutonium safe. Meanwhile, I have something else I’d like you to do for me.’

‘What is it?’

Sanger momentarily became lost in his thoughts. ‘I want you to look into some minor league difficulties that we are experiencing with a group of overgrown schoolboys. They need to be taught a lesson that they will not forget. Make an example of them.’

‘We?’ asked Ryman. ‘Meaning . . .?’

‘International Communications Conglomerate. If I had meant “we”, we wouldn’t be having this conversation on our own. We would *all* be here.’

Those who believe that, in a world of infinite variety, an improbable amount of duplication occurs naturally would have just *loved* the coincidence.

At almost exactly the same moment that Ryman and Sanger were discussing Bulyjin's arrival in the US, four hundred miles to the north, in an ostensibly identical office on the twenty-ninth floor of San Francisco's Transamerica Pyramid, a remarkably similar topic was being discussed.

'The information that we have from our sources in LA,' said Frank Greaves, 'is that there's a UNIT presence in the city.' Greaves was a gnomish, tired-looking man with thinning blond hair and a sickly pale complexion that suggested far too many sleepless nights. He cast a nervous glance at his CIA superior who was small, completely inconspicuous and in his early fifties. Greaves wondered briefly if this information was what he wanted to hear. But, as on so many occasions in the past, the man behind the desk merely gave Greaves a wry smile full of double meanings (or, perhaps, no meaning at all), pressed his fingers together underneath his chin and closed his eyes as though searching for some inner truth.

'The information was a little garbled,' continued Greaves, hurriedly. The first message was that the arrival was merely of various agents of a foreign power, but ...'

'The British?'

'Yes. How did you ...?'

Control smiled like the cat who had got the cream. 'Lethbridge-Stewart and I are old friends,' he said enthusiastically. 'We go way back.'

The closing doors. That was all she could concentrate on. It was all she would allow herself to think about.

'Make it, make it, make it, make it ...'

She stumbled the last few steps and then threw herself at the ever-decreasing gap between the metal and glass of the Shinkansen bullet train's doors. Her trailing leg felt the sear of rubber scraping across her skin as she flew the final couple of yards virtually horizontal and fell with a muffled crunch into the carriage.

'Made it!'

Behind her, the doors closed with a satisfied hiss of compressed air. On the floor of the train Kyla spun round, avoiding the startled and disapproving looks of her fellow passengers. She looked back through the window at the four men, all wearing dark green uniforms, who were emerging on to the platform. All the jackets bore identical insignia on their lapels; the same insignia that was emblazoned on her own blouse collar. A globe, overlaid with the letters IC.

Before the men could get any closer to the train, it took off at speed. Inside, Kyla breathed slowly. She felt dizzy and sick, and noticed for the first time

the bloodied and grazed knees and palms that her desperate leap for freedom had cost.

She tried to stand but her legs turned to jelly and she flopped down again, hard on to the carriage floor. A middle-aged Japanese man was talking to her excitedly, but she waved him away with a steady shake of her hand. She crawled a few feet into a luggage space between the seats, where she allowed herself to collapse – laughing – on to her back. She was oblivious to everything around her now. Nothing else mattered. Reaching into the pocket of her skirt she pulled out a computer disk. She cradled it in her bleeding hands, still laughing.

There was a gleeful look on her face, despite the pain. She had won.

‘Got them,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘Got the bastards at last!’

The haulage truck slowed, almost to a snail’s pace, and the roller shutter opened.

‘Mr Bulyjin?’

‘Who wants to know?’ asked Bulyjin angrily, shielding his eyes from the fierce sunlight that streamed into the dark interior.

The man, silhouetted in the harsh light, seemed to take an eternity to answer such a simple question. ‘My name is Stephen Joyce, I’m president of InterCom’s research and development division. Welcome to America.’

Bulyjin gestured around him. ‘A truck with no windows,’ he said loudly. ‘I expected something better than this.’

‘Understandable,’ replied Joyce as the vehicle stopped completely. ‘I believe we have arrived.’

Bulyjin looked at Joyce closely. He was a small man with close-set eyes and a thin, bird-like face. ‘*Where* have we arrived?’ asked Bulyjin nervously.

‘InterCom headquarters. Where the action is! Come with me.’ Joyce led the way from the truck down a short ramp to the cool blackness of a concrete tunnel. Behind him, his metal suitcase still clamped tightly to his chest, Bulyjin tried to get used to the sudden change in his surroundings. Set into the tunnel wall was an elevator head and they arrived there just as the doors clanked open.

‘I’ll take you straight to Dr Lewis’s lab,’ said Joyce, stepping into the elevator. ‘He’ll be very keen to see what you’ve brought us today.’

‘When do I get to see Sanger?’ demanded Bulyjin, putting a confirming foot on the floor of the elevator cage before he entered.

‘*Mr Sanger?* Presently,’ replied Joyce pushing the button marked S3. ‘First, we’re going underground.’

‘I don’t deal with subordinates,’ continued Bulyjin contemptuously. ‘I was a regional commander in the KGB.’

‘Yes,’ replied Joyce. ‘And now, you’re a courier. It’s an ill wind, as they say.’

On the third lower level Bulyjin found himself in a lengthy, white-brick corridor.

‘As I’m sure you’ll agree,’ noted Joyce, proudly, ‘our internal security is second to none. A fly couldn’t get into this place without us knowing about it. Ah, here we are.’

Bulyjin and Joyce approached a sparsely furnished laboratory with two armed guards in the dark green InterCom uniforms standing on either side of the door. Bulyjin cast an ominous glance at them but they stared straight ahead, not even acknowledging his presence as he and Joyce entered the lab. The room itself was dull and ordinary, undecorated and inconsequential, and there were two men standing inside it.

‘Mr Bulyjin, allow me to introduce our head of security, Shaun Ryman. And our chief research scientist in the US, Richard Lewis.’ Bulyjin arrogantly ignored the pair. He placed his briefcase on the work surface.

‘You will wish to view the merchandise, yes?’

‘I’d say that would be mutually beneficial,’ noted Ryman, indicating that Lewis should be the one to open the case.

The scientist, a tall, balding man wearing wire-framed spectacles and a pair of thick padded radiation gloves, moved towards the case. ‘Is it booby-trapped?’ he asked cautiously.

‘It was,’ noted Bulyjin. ‘I deactivated it whilst in the truck. Nothing else to do,’ he said, giving Joyce a cold stare.

‘Indeed,’ replied Joyce, with the kind of smile that sharks give just before they bite people in two.

‘Open it,’ said Ryman, impatiently.

Lewis opened it.

He spent half a minute carefully examining the contents inside. When he had finished, he closed the case and removed his gloves, dropping them into a pedal bin. Then he turned to Joyce and Ryman.

‘Well?’ asked Ryman.

‘Perfect,’ said Lewis.

‘Thank you, Mr Bulyjin,’ said Ryman turning to the Ukrainian. ‘I believe our business is more or less complete.’

‘There only remains the outstanding issue of five million US dollars,’ said Bulyjin, just as the two guards came through the door and grabbed him in a headlock. They dragged him amid muffled shouts and curses towards the vault door of a side observation room.

‘You animals,’ he shouted, before lapsing into a tirade in his native tongue.

‘What’s he saying?’ asked one of the guards, laughing.

‘That’s no way to talk to your hosts,’ said Joyce as the guard punched the Ukrainian in the small of the back, knocking him to the floor as though he were a novice welterweight being given the thrashing of his life by Mohammed Ali.

A gun butt smashed into the bridge of Bulyjin’s nose and suddenly there was blood everywhere as the guards dragged him back to his feet.

‘Another happy volunteer for your DNA contraption,’ noted Ryman as he watched Bulyjin being thrown into the room and the door closing behind him. ‘In the fifty-million-to-one chance that this actually works, make sure that Sanger’s told about it immediately,’ he said as he turned his back on the bloodied Ukrainian who was hammering his fists soundlessly against the glass of the door.

‘And if you could make the process last as long as possible, I’d be *really* grateful,’ he added, with a look of pleasure on his face.

It was a typically beautiful midsummer Parisian afternoon, with a civilised breeze taking the fire from the heat of the day.

Pavel Luvik’s car crossed the Petit Pont in the shadow of Notre Dame cathedral and the driver parked on the corner of the bustling Rue de la Huchette. Luvik walked the last thirty yards to La Maison Blanc, acknowledging its owner with a friendly smile. As he reached the restaurant a poorly dressed man approached him and asked him for money.

‘Fichez-moi la paix!’ said Luvik flatly.

‘Allez-vous-en sinon j’appelle un agent,’ continued the proprietor angrily, waving his arms as the beggar scuttled off into a side street. *‘Vous devrez le signaler à la police?’* he asked Luvik.

Luvik shook his head. *‘J’ai réservé une table pour deux. Un café noir, s’il vous plaît.’*

‘Oui Monsieur. Comment vous appelez-vous?’

‘Je m’appelle Luvik. Je suis ici en voyage d’affaires. J’ai rendezvous avec Monsieur Alain Giresse.’ Luvik felt momentarily embarrassed at his no more than basic command of conversational French, but the proprietor smiled benevolently.

‘Le nom de votre compagnie, s’il vous plaît?’

‘InterCom,’ said Luvik, straightening his tie.

There was a sudden change in the restaurant owner’s attitude. From slowly courteous to hurriedly businesslike and servile. *‘D’accord. Prenez l’ascenseur jusqu’au troisième étage.’*

‘Tres bien. Merci beaucoup,’ replied Luvik automatically as he entered the lift and headed for the third floor. He found Giresse sitting at a balcony table overlooking the Seine.

'*Salut. Comment ça va aujourd'hui?*'

'*Quelle belle journée!*' Luvik sat at the table. 'This place is a little obscure, even for you!'

'It was recommended to me by a friend,' said Giresse for the benefit of Luvik who had never been comfortable with languages. 'I love the Latin Quarter in summer. So alive and vibrant. A little wine?'

'Thank you, no,' answered Luvik. 'I've already ordered coffee.'

Giresse moved the conversation to less mundane matters. 'Developments in Prague since we last spoke?' he asked.

Luvik shrugged sadly. 'We keep stumbling into blind alleys.'

'It is to be expected,' said Giresse. He turned and signalled to the waitress at the back of the room with a click of his fingers. '*Mademoiselle. Pardon, où est mon steak frites? Vite! Vite!*' The girl scurried off in search of his meal. 'Progress is slow everywhere,' Giresse noted with no apparent irony.

'Did I miss much in Tokyo?'

'Only another failure,' replied Giresse. 'Chung Sen was in a terrible state. In different circumstances it would have been amusing. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* There will be a full meeting of the conglomerate tomorrow morning in Los Angeles as a consequence.'

Luvik raised his eyebrows. 'Serious?'

'Sanger seems to think so. He's been in touch with Jexa.'

Luvik's face betrayed only a fraction of the terror he felt at this moment, but his voice was unsteady and filled with dread. 'That's a place I never thought I'd have to see again.'

Giresse clearly had a similar hope. He turned away from Luvik for a moment and looked out across the river at his beloved Paris. '*Je suis désolé, je ne peux rien faire. Je ne suis pas le responsable.* Things are bad there they say,' he noted in a measured, yet slightly high-pitched, tone confirming Luvik's impression that Giresse, too, would sooner be talking about anything other than their home planet. 'The league are demanding that we make progress. Time is running out.'

'For them or for us?' asked Luvik.

'For our *race*,' replied Giresse starkly.

Chapter Four

California

Anywhere else in the world, the appearance out of thin air of a small blue box in a public place may have caused quite a commotion.

But not in downtown Hollywood.

The TARDIS materialised in the street next to Mann's Chinese Theatre and the Doctor, Tegan and Turlough found themselves the subject of an animated discussion between two young men wearing fashionably baggy leisurewear and bemused expressions.

'Radical,' noted one, leaving a space between each of the three syllables to emphasise just how impressed he was.

'Yeah,' said his friend. 'Nice effect. Computer-generated?'

'Colour separation overlay,' replied the Doctor dismissively, locking the TARDIS behind him. He raised his white summer hat and left the two boys looking at the blue box. 'That's what I love about this city,' he told Tegan, as he led her across Hollywood Boulevard. 'They appreciate spectacle. Oh, Turlough,' he said, turning, 'watch out for the ...'

The squeal of car tyres and the blast of a car horn mixed with Turlough's yelp of distress, as he threw himself out of the path of the oncoming vehicles.

'Yes,' continued the Doctor, thoughtfully. 'They don't take prisoners.'

'This place is a nightmare,' said Turlough, loosening his tie and looking in horror at the traffic.

'Oh, I don't know,' replied the Doctor. 'It has a certain gaudy charm. I rather like it.'

'You've been here before?' asked Tegan.

'A while back,' noted the Doctor. 'I was trying to save the world. As usual. Hopefully this won't be so drastic.'

His companions both looked dubious. 'I doubt it,' said Turlough cynically. 'We wouldn't be here if it wasn't important.'

'That's probably true,' agreed the Doctor as he searched through his pockets for the address of their hotel. 'We shall find out all in good time, I'm sure.'

'Time ...?' began Tegan.

'It's *always* about time. Time is relative. What has happened, will happen again. Ah!' said the Doctor triumphantly as he produced the note from his

trouser pocket. ‘We’re booked into the Beverly Hills Hotel on Sunset Boulevard which, if my sense of direction hasn’t deserted me, means . . .’

‘. . . that we’d better start looking for a taxi,’ said Turlough.

‘Yes,’ responded the Doctor positively. That isn’t the worst idea you’ve ever had. What do you think, Tegan?’

There was no reply. Instead, when the Doctor and Turlough turned they saw Tegan thirty yards away marching in the direction of an angry scene in the street.

‘Oh dear,’ said the Doctor, ‘I suppose we’d better intervene before she does something rash.’ They set off at a trot, and caught up with Tegan just as she was about to tell the entire world her opinion.

‘Leave him alone!’

‘Excuse me?’ said the LAPD patrol officer currently kneeling on the back of a man in his twenties who was shouting obscenities.

‘I apologise for my companion’s behaviour,’ said the Doctor quickly. ‘How do you do, I’m the Doctor . . .’ He held out his hand but was ignored by the policeman, who left the struggling man in the custody of three colleagues who were variously handcuffing him and beating him with their batons.

‘Excuse me?’ the officer repeated, coming eyeball to eyeball with Tegan.

Turlough thought about running. He estimated that he could probably make it to the TARDIS before anybody noticed he wasn’t there. No key. Blast.

He looked at the Doctor who had become strangely passive.

If there was one thing that didn’t intimidate Tegan Jovanka, however, it was a bully in a uniform. She had dealt with enough of those when training to be a stewardess.

‘I said, “Leave him alone”, which I believe you heard.’

‘Look,’ interjected the Doctor reasonably, ‘I’m sure we can sort this out very easily if you’ll just . . .’

Again, the officer ignored the Doctor. ‘You’re aware who this man is, ma’am?’ he asked Tegan.

‘No, but that doesn’t matter,’ she replied. ‘He’s entitled to basic human rights, and one of those is not being beaten to a pulp in the streets by four Nazi storm-troopers in drag.’

The policeman smiled, his teeth gleaming as brightly as his sunglasses, which the sunlight had just caught. The light momentarily dazzled Tegan. Ohmigod, she thought, you’ve gone and done it now. She could see the Doctor was trying desperately to think of something to say. He’d talked his way out of confrontations with Cybermen, renegade Time Lords, even the Black Guardian of the universe. But now he had that look on his face that said *you’re on your own*.

‘Shut up, lady!’ said the policeman angrily. ‘This son of a bitch is one of those terrorist freaks that blew up the De Randolph building last week. Five dead. Eighty-three injured. So get the hell out of my way and let us put this piece of shit where he belongs. And, hey, have a nice day!’

And with that, he spun on his heels and returned to his colleagues who were bundling the protesting man into the back of their car.

No one said anything. Turlough had wandered away from the Doctor and Tegan during the confrontation and seemed uncertain as to whether he should get involved now.

Finally Tegan turned to the Doctor. ‘Well?’ she shouted, ‘aren’t you going to say anything?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. Then he changed his mind. ‘Let’s find a taxi.’

‘Are you English by any chance?’

The Doctor looked up from his copy of *The Times*. ‘I’ve come from London,’ he said truthfully. ‘How do you do?’ The woman appeared to be in her late forties. She was strikingly lovely, with bobbed blonde hair and a rich complexion. The Doctor recognised the regionality of the accent immediately. ‘Somerset?’

‘Bath, originally,’ she said with a charming smile as she sat down next to him. ‘I live in Hampshire. Do you know Redborough at all? It’s just south of . . .’

‘Basingstoke. Yes I do, actually,’ said the Doctor. ‘I did some work down there once for . . .’ He laughed at his inability to break the Official Secrets Act. ‘Well, it was all a bit hush-hush, you know?’ he said, tapping the side of his nose.

‘I understand,’ replied the woman, with a conspiratorial wink. ‘Julia Franklin.’

‘The Doctor.’

The woman looked nonplussed. ‘Doctor?’

‘*The*,’ replied the Doctor. He shook his head apologetically. ‘Smith. What brings you to America?’

‘Turned left at Greenland,’ said Julia. Then she realised the joke hadn’t worked because the wrong question had been asked and blushed furiously. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘You must think me a scatterbrain.’

The Doctor was keen to assure her that he was thinking nothing of the kind. ‘Not at all,’ he replied and folded his newspaper, putting it back on the hotel-lobby table where he’d found it. ‘The question stands, however!’

‘Wedding anniversary. Robert and I are doing the Universal-Disneyland-Vegas-Grand Canyon experience thing. It was our daughter’s idea, actually. We normally go to the Lakes.’

'It's a surprising country,' noted the Doctor. 'Big and absorbing.'

'Absolutely. But a bit queer. Do you know,' said Julia, leaning forward and speaking in a hushed whisper as though terrified that their conversation may be overheard by embittered locals. 'that they drive on the *wrong* side of the road?'

'I can't say that I'd noticed.'

Julia paused for a moment as if still unsure about whether her next 'amazing fact' was completely accurate. 'And tonight,' she eventually continued, 'we're going to a tandoori house for dinner. Can you believe that? I didn't even know they *had* them in America. I mean, I know there's an Indian character in *The Simpson*, but that's just a cartoon, isn't it?'

The Doctor nodded sympathetically. 'I imagine there will be a few more things that will surprise you before you get back to England.'

'I'm sure you're right,' said Julia. 'But that's part of the reason why we all travel, isn't it? You take old Mr Shearer, our gardener. Never been ten miles outside the village in his entire life and he's eighty-three –' She was interrupted by the arrival of her husband, a tall, powerful-looking middle-aged man with dark hair and a rugged, weather-beaten face. A policeman, the Doctor decided. Confirmation came when he glanced down at the man's size fourteen shoes.

Definitely a policeman.

'Our taxi's here,' said Mr Franklin.

'Cab Robert,' corrected Julia pointedly. 'And a lift's an elevator. Remember?! When in Rome ...'

'Yes dear.'

'Did you get the postcards?' she asked.

Robert held them out for his wife to inspect.

'Marvellous,' she replied cheerfully. 'We'll need a couple for Mrs Speed, and Miss Barton from the off-licence. And the Dyers. How could we forget them? We've got to tell them about all these bombs going off.'

The Doctor was suddenly interested but before he could get a word in edgewise the couple had left the hotel, still excitedly chattering about trivialities. He briefly wondered whether Tegan and Turlough had finished checking in. Another man was sitting in the lobby, sipping a coffee.

'Good evening,' said the Doctor with a bright smile. 'Lovely weather.'

'You got that right,' said the guest. This one, at least, was an American. 'Too damn hot though. I'm from Minnesota. The climate's more civilised up there!'

'I'm sure,' noted the Doctor. 'It's a nice hotel.'

'Last time I was here the bar was full of drunken Englishmen singing "Perfect Day".'

‘I wonder if you could help me,’ asked the Doctor. ‘My companions and I have just arrived. We noticed something very strange in Hollywood today.’

The man snorted derisively and put down his coffee cup. ‘If you go through a day and *don’t* see something strange in Tinseltown, be extremely afraid my friend,’ he said. ‘Hell may just have frozen right over!’

‘A police officer was arresting a man.’

This clearly didn’t surprise the man in the slightest. ‘Pusher? Pimp? You don’t get those things in Europe?!’

‘Nothing like that,’ replied the Doctor. ‘He said this man was involved in terrorism . . .’

‘Oh,’ said the American. ‘I got ya. The Sons of Nostradamus.’

‘The *what?!*’ asked the Doctor incredulously.

‘They’re like your IRA boys,’ continued the man. ‘A bunch of fanatics who like blowing things up with nail bombs. They’ve been around for a few months.’

The Doctor’s interest was now intense. ‘The name? I *have* to ask.’

‘You know who Nostradamus was?’

‘Yes,’ replied the Doctor. ‘A sixteenth-century French doctor, writer and . . .’
‘A seer.’

‘Allegedly,’ corrected the Doctor. ‘I’m not entirely sure I believe in mystical visions, personally. At least not those sort of mystical visions.’

‘That don’t stop folks who do believe in that sort of thing from believing in that sort of thing, if you see what I mean?’

‘Interesting.’

The man leaned forward towards the Doctor: as with Julia he was seemingly afraid that their conversation could be overheard. Though for vastly different reasons. ‘According to NBC they’re working with other crazy people in Europe and Japan, bombing TV studios, Internet cafés and public buildings. They’re fulfilling Nostradamus’s prophecies, so they say. The end of the world is nigh, all that crap.’ The man stood up. ‘I don’t know what this country’s coming to. Once upon a time the only people you had to worry about were the goddamn immigrants. Now it’s white guys from down the street. It’s getting scary.’

He left, shaking his head, just as Turlough arrived holding a pair of keys in his hand.

‘Sorry that took so long,’ he said. ‘They wanted to confirm we were who we said we were and everybody in UNIT’s Los Angeles office was too busy to take the call.’ He looked at the departing man. ‘What was all that about?’

‘Those terrorists,’ said the Doctor, seemingly deep in thought.

‘Surety the activities of a group of madmen have nothing to do with why we’re here?’

'Have you learned nothing from our time together?' the Doctor asked, in irritation. '*Everything* is connected.'

'To what?' asked Turlough.

'Everything else, of course.'

'I often think that cubism was an expression of optimism rather than taste.'

Paolo Sanger stroked his chin, deep in thought. 'Meaning?'

Joyce walked around the geometrical reconstruction of a cat. 'Symbolists believed that one could achieve order from chaos. Expressionists believed that order was chaos ...'

'Surrealists?'

Joyce shook his head. 'Who knows what *those* guys were thinking about? The point is that art is all about meaning. I'm not sure what *this* means.' He gestured towards the Picasso. 'It's pretty, but is it art?'

'It means whatever you want it to mean,' said Sanger, still staring intently at the painting. 'Logic is dead. Use your imagination. The purpose of art is to disturb.' He held his thumb out towards the canvas and turned it sideways, closing one eye and dramatically squinting at the painting. '*Feel* the work. Feel the lines, the spaces, the depth ...'

'You've really turned pretentious since you bought this place, haven't you?'

There was a significant pause before Sanger turned and walked into a different section of the white-walled art gallery. He removed a pair of half-moon spectacles from the breast pocket of his jacket and slipped them on to the bridge of his nose.

'For those of you watching in black and white, this one is in Technicolor. Pre-Raphaelite is more to your tastes, no doubt? Millais?'

Joyce hurried to keep up. 'Yes,' he replied, peering closely at *The Blind Girl*. 'How much did it cost?'

'Nine million,' replied Sanger dismissively. 'You admire it?'

'I do.'

'The price of this art is junkies and whores,' Sanger continued. 'The product of a world that will soon be engulfed in flames.'

Chapter Five

Turn Left at the Rising Sun

The night had come quickly but still Control sat in his office, like a spider at the centre of a gigantic web of intrigue and mayhem. His green-baize-topped desk contained not the paper clutter of bygone days, but a single laptop computer and a constant scrolling stream of information. In the dark, the reflection from the screen lit up his face with strange reds and blues. He looked like the silhouette of an alien, and not a little demonic, to Greaves who entered with a single knock and stood waiting for his summons into Control's presence.

Sometimes the dandruff on Control's collar gave the impression of someone who was slowly crumbling to dust. An individual who had spent too long in the darkness and the shadows and, like a vampire, was damned by the light.

On other occasions Greaves, or one of his colleagues, would catch themselves looking at Control out of the corner of their eye when they entered or left his room.

What they saw, or thought they saw, terrified them.

'The sad thing about the advance of technology is that information becomes fractured. Abstract.'

'How do you mean?' asked Greaves nervously.

'This gimmick gives me access to everything. A world of random fragments. There *are* patterns, but you spend so much time finding them that you get lost in the maelstrom.'

It was pure chaos theory, thought Greaves, sadly. Maybe the old boy really was losing it. 'I never thought you would subscribe to such a Luddite view,' he said, astonished at Control's brave and lonely battle against the windmills.

Control, however, didn't seem interested in Greaves's comments. 'The transfer and receipt of information has become impersonal. We look at this cold screen of glass and are given . . .' He paused. It was, thought Greaves, the first time he had ever seen him lost for words. At length Control said simply, 'It shows you everything, but it tells you nothing.'

'Interesting way of putting it,' replied Greaves as Control switched on the office lights and turned the screen away.

Control smiled, benevolently, and asked, 'You have some gossip for me?'

'Yes,' Greaves said, ever eager to please. 'The information we've been waiting for. It's in the hands of friendly sources.'

Control was silent again. The only sound was the distant traffic noise, the hum of the office air conditioning and Greaves himself. He was aware, for the first time, of how loud his breathing was in the presence of Control.

'Good news tends to come all at once,' said Control, shattering the peace like a hammer through a plate-glass window. He picked up the telephone. 'I think it's time I gave out a little good news myself.'

'What are you doing?'

'I'm giving InterCom the thing they most want,' said Control. 'An alien.'

There were thirteen in the sepulchre. The inner sanctum. They knelt in a circle around the pentagram, their faces masked from the flickering candlelight by the black, hooded cloaks they wore. The air was heavily scented with incense, and buzzed with a low murmur of whispered chanting.

And the soundtrack to *The Omen*, which was playing on a cassette recorder.

'For it is written,' said the leader, standing up. 'Written in the blood of the prophet, *Six jours l'assaut devant citte donne, livres sera forte et aspre bataille, trois la rendront et a eux pardonmne, le reste a feu et a sang tranche taille.*'

'Couldn't he have written it in English?' muttered one of the coven.

'I shall translate for those Philistines without a degree in medieval French like what I have,' said the leader, pulling back his hood.

His name was Jon Newton and he looked like an unholy cross between Aleister Crowley and the *With the Beatles*-era Ringo Starr. He wore a black polo-neck shirt beneath his cloak, and a weighty gold ankh medallion that threatened to snap him in two. His accent was pure English West Country.

The group knew little about him, other than that he was wanted in sixteen countries around the world for various acts of witchcraft, terrorism, murder, embezzlement and that nasty business with the chicken farm in Brazil. They also knew that he was charismatic, prone to extreme paranoia and mood swings and that he had transformed their group from a hopeless bunch of drifters into one of the most feared terrorist organisations America had ever known.

They just wished he would stop hitting them quite so often.

Newton cleared his throat and, as he did so, landed a stinging backhand across the face of the nearest of his brethren.

'Ow! What was that for?' asked Bill Quay pitifully. Bill was big and hairy, a dead ringer for Noddy Holder circa 1973, only without the mirrored top hat and the talent.

'Pay attention,' said Newton. 'For it is written, "For six days shall they assault the city from the front. A great and fierce battle shall be fought. Pardoned,

three shall surrender. The rest shall be put to the fire. And the sword”?

‘Great,’ said Hayley Tonkin eagerly. Short-sighted and hugely overweight, she removed her bottle-end spectacles and cleaned them on the hem of her T-shirt. ‘When’s that happening then?’

‘Who shall know the exact moment of the end of days?’

‘I thought you said you did?’ murmured Nigel Dunkley, a slight, pale-looking young man with a strange haircut and severe acne.

‘I do,’ hissed Newton angrily. ‘And you don’t. So watch it, sunshine, or I’ll knock your block off.’ And, just to emphasise this, he clipped Bill Quay around the ear again.

‘What’s *that* for?’

‘Effect!’ answered Newton.

Once they had been a group of dropout anarchists who, because of a shared interest in hardcore SF, had named themselves the Black Anoraks. They had been active on the margins of militia-group politics, but really they were just in it to surf the Internet to find things worth bombing. And then bomb them. Some, like Hayley and Nigel, were English. She was the daughter of an obscure earl, he was the son of a milkman from Hull who’d got a scholarship to Harvard and then decided to travel the land that begot *Star Trek* for opportunity and profit. Others like Bill, Sam Danvers and Lynda Bowmar were a raggle-taggle bunch of student radicals, computer geeks and people who liked causing other people lots of suffering.

They were a relatively harmless bunch of sadists who – apart from blowing up a couple of TV stations when they had the temerity to stop showing *Space 2693* – spent most of their time on alt.nerd.obsessive bitching about the state of the media. With pseudonyms like ‘Trilogy’, ‘Canon’ and ‘Ret-Con’, they threatened no one of any consequence.

That was until Newton got amongst them and organised them. And gave them a cause (however vague). Suddenly, they were a bunch of laughable clowns no longer. Now, they were the Sons of Nostradamus. And they were dangerous.

The cassette spluttered to silence. Bill got up to fix it. ‘The batteries are dead,’ he said, picking up the machine and shaking it. This worked and the monastic chanting was resurrected (if only momentarily).

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, leave it alone. I told you to get another packet of LR20s, but would you listen?’ moaned Newton.

‘Do we have to have this crap on? I’ve got some Delerium in my bag, they’re pretty ambient!’ suggested Hayley. She shuffled her plump bottom on the cold stone floor.

Bill shrugged and sat down again, pondering on how much better things had been in the Anoraks. In those days it was simply a case of putting some

hapless local Fox affiliate on The List and then, KA-BOOM. Now there was all this ritual involved. And the hitting.

'The great seer goes on to say that Castor, Pollux and a comet shall appear in the sky before a monarch is killed. Century II.15, check it out, it's a good one. "The letters of the great prophet shall be intercepted, they shall fall into the hands of the tyrant, who shall deceive the King with their troubles" That's us you see, *we're* the tyrants.' And, to show he meant it. Newton smacked Nigel across the back of the head.

'Stop doin' that!'

Nostradamus used the magiks of his day and looked into his burning water to be given his visions. By Lucifer. "The most learned of the celestial sciences shall be found wanting by the ignorant Princes. Condemned by a proclamation and banished as evil. Surely, they shall be put to death."

Newton liked the sound of that. They all did. 'Patience, kiddies,' he said with a broad wink. 'Chaos and carnage shall be ours. Soon we will meet the man who will lead us through the end of days, and into a new age. "His war shall last seven-and-twenty years, the heretics slain, the captives exiled, the waters shall run red with blood."'

Turlough had promised the Doctor he would stay out of trouble, but he longed to explore Los Angeles. The neon and plasticity fascinated him. It was, he thought, just like Trion. Before the revolution.

In three hours he'd become lost in the bedazzling glitter of the city of lights. Even the unnerving suspicion that he was constantly being watched had begun to fade. Besides, he was used to these paranoid moments. Travelling with the Doctor made thinking that everyone (no matter how bright their smile or short their skirt) was trying to kill you into an occupational hazard. He felt hedonistic and alive; at last he'd found somewhere in the universe that had no pretensions of being anything other than what it actually was.

The palm trees may have suggested paradise, but the looks on the faces of those he met told him that LA was a living hell. *Brilliant*. Turlough's kind of town.

Not only that, but because he was somewhere other than England the Brendon uniform meant nothing. The only culture here was money culture. Turlough didn't have much money but he had the one thing that in Los Angeles mattered almost as much – an English accent.

All the girls just love the accent.

Plus, he had a UNIT ID card that told any nosy barman that he was twenty-one.

And so it was that he found himself in a bar on Sunset Strip, drinking his eighth beer and surrounded by a plethora of beautiful, gagging-for-it women,

all of whom swooned every time he opened his mouth. Hell? OK, maybe a second opinion was required . . .

‘What’s your name?’ asked one of the women. Bunny? Or Candy? Something soft and fluffy that ends in a ‘y’.

‘Turlough,’ he said instinctively, still thinking he was in Mr Sellick’s history class. Then he relaxed, remembering he was a continent away from real hell. ‘Vislor,’ he continued. ‘Junior Ensign Commander . . .’ He was, he reflected, very, very drunk.

‘You’re English, right?’

‘I’m *from* England, yes.’

‘God, I just *love* your accent,’ said the y-ending Thing. Thankfully, she didn’t go on to ask him if he knew ‘Mrs Smith in Blackpool’.

Turlough’s eyes caught those of a woman sitting towards the back of the group. *You’re in Big Trouble* she seemed to say. *Avoid the y-ending Thing, Vislor. She’s like Cybill Shepherd on acid. She’ll mess with your mind because she’s so bland.*

‘Excuse me,’ said Turlough, almost falling from his bar stool. ‘I have to pee.’

When he returned the women had gone. All except the one with the eyes.

The magic eyes.

‘Amazing contraptions,’ Turlough said, pointing drunkenly towards the lavatories. ‘Individual flushes. What will they think of next?’

‘Can’t say I’ve noticed,’ said the woman. ‘I don’t frequent the men’s room.’

‘You should,’ said Turlough, far too loudly. So he sat down, heavily. ‘You should,’ he repeated. ‘Very educational. Everything I learned about life I got from the wall of the fourth cubicle in C dorm.’ Turlough tapped the side of his nose, in a keep it shtumm fashion. ‘Not that I’m telling tales out of school y’understand,’ he said. Then realisation hit him firmly in the face. ‘Except, that I am of course. But it was a crappy school anyway. Now you take Eton, they’ve got the lot.’ Turlough finished his drink. There was a madness in his eyes, as though he had suddenly realised just how far from home he was. Literally and metaphorically. ‘You have absolutely no idea what I’m blathering on about, do you?’

‘No,’ said the girl, licking her lips. ‘But I’d like to. You interested in science?’

‘I live for science,’ said Turlough. His attention was briefly caught by a football game on the TV above the bar, but the girl grabbed it back with both hands.

‘It must be amazing to be on other planets, don’t you think?’

‘Sure,’ said Turlough, with an unconvincing shrug of the shoulders. ‘Why not? I mean, have you *been* to Milton Keynes?’

‘I’m Eva, you want to have sex with me?’

Turlough had never understood the rules of American football, but he was fairly certain that one chap had just scored and . . . ‘I beg your pardon?’

Eva draped a silk scarf around her shoulders. ‘I’d kill for a cigarette,’ she said flatly. ‘But you can’t smoke in bars in this state because the government are all Nazis. You want to come back to my place?’

‘Yes, I’d be quite prepared for that eventuality,’ said Turlough with as much dignity as he could, before sliding off his stool again. ‘But first,’ he added, ‘I have to go in there again and be sick.’

It was an apartment on the eighth floor of a building three blocks from the bar. By the time they reached it the night air had cleared the cotton wool from Turlough’s head and he was starting to think about what the Doctor had said.

Everything is connected.

Other planets . . .

Turlough stopped as they reached the door to Eva’s apartment and she fumbled to find her keys. His brain was starting to go all fuzzy again.

Inside, Eva kicked off her shoes and went into the bedroom. ‘Help yourself to a drink,’ she shouted as Turlough looked around her apartment. It was tasteful in a sparse, minimalist kind of way. He picked up the TV remote control and turned it on. The football game was still going. The Redhats versus the Bluetrousers. Or something. Thirty-three-all, heading into overtime. Fourth-and-goal. End zone.

Turlough moved to the drinks cabinet and saw an envelope resting under a bottle of whisky. Eva Oblon, it said. He poured himself a triple whisky and drank it in one throat-burning gulp.

Fourth-and-goal.

End zone.

‘Nice place you have,’ he said slumping on to the sofa.

‘It’s surprisingly expensive,’ said Eva coming to the door. She was wearing a purple blouse with a daringly plunging neckline. ‘It belongs to the company I work for.’

‘What do you do?’ asked Turlough, as his eyes bulged briefly out of their sockets then popped themselves back in.

‘I’m in computers,’ said Eva, moving with cat-like elegance across the room, hips swishing, glossy lips slightly curved into a smile of sensuality. ‘I make things happen.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Turlough, unable to think of anything else to say.

She sat in a chair opposite him, drinking wine. ‘Tell me about yourself,’ she said.

Turlough wanted her. Passion burned like a forest fire. He could feel every emotion within him screaming at him to take her.

'I . . . travel,' he said. He took another huge drink of whisky. The fire burned even more strongly. But when Eva crossed her legs a cold spasm of anxiety ran down Turlough's spine. 'I also have some connections with a covert paramilitary organisation.' He laughed. It was a hollow, mirthless chuckle that came from God knows where. Turlough almost bit his tongue off at the stump.

Eva nodded. 'UNIT?'

'Yes,' said Turlough. If he was surprised he didn't show it. He was trying to stop himself talking but he kept on babbling, his voice growing slurred and indistinct as he became a detached and distant observer to his own speech. 'I'm not from your planet. I travel in time and space with a Gallifreyan Time Lord called the Doctor. I've been his companion for almost a year. The machine we travel in is called the TARDIS, which stands for Time and Relative Dimensions in Space. I don't understand the physics, but fourth-and-fifth-dimensional mechanics are involved.' Finally Turlough was allowed to pause in his litany of deceit and betrayal. 'Some sort of truth serum?' he asked; at last his words belonged to him again. 'Please don't hurt me.'

He slumped to one side. He could see Eva moving towards him at an angle of forty-five degrees. She knelt beside him and gently planted a solitary, comforting kiss on one cheek. He knew he'd been drugged. He'd seen similar results during the early days of the revolution when the insurgents had been taken to the Presidium.

'Don't be frightened,' said Eva. 'You and I are going to have lots to talk about.'

She stood and picked up the telephone. There was a lengthy delay whilst she waited for someone to answer it, during which she gave Turlough a sideways glance.

Those magic eyes were now lifeless pools. Opaque and dead, the colour of phlegm. Under normal circumstances Turlough would have screamed until his lungs burst. But he found himself tongue-tied and mute. An effect of the drug, perhaps. Still Eva looked at him, as though he were something that she was examining under a microscope.

'I think I may have what we're looking for,' she told the person on the other end of the line.

Turlough felt a cold sickness at the pit of his stomach. It was terror. He knew its embrace well. He began to cry.

Chapter Six

Bittersweet Symphony

A black cat ran across Roman's path as he reached his destination.

Startled, the animal turned its head to look directly at him. Its eyes glowed green, reflected from a distant source – possibly a car or a streetlight. It hissed, angrily.

It *knew*.

Ryman inclined his head to one side. An interesting creature, operating purely by instinct. Survival its only goal. Mankind tried to domesticate it, to castrate its single-mindedness, but the cat would never allow itself to be mastered. Ryman approved. He knelt to touch the animal but, sensing danger, it bolted away into the shrubbery.

Ryman stood up and entered the building, taking the elevator to the top floor. Then he walked the final flight of stairs to the roof. There, in a pale moonlight, he could see two InterCom guards holding a young man against the railings that separated him from a 300-foot drop to a rather messy death. A third man wearing the InterCom uniform moved towards Ryman. Robert Chebb, one of his most trusted deputies.

'We found him in Compton,' said Chebb, indicating the captive with his thumb. 'He's one of them all right.'

Ryman nodded and moved towards the little group at the railings. He signalled to the guards to release their prisoner. Ryman looked into the boy's terrified eyes and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He offered one to the boy who took it with shaking hands and gratefully accepted the light that Ryman gave him.

'Smells like you've had a bit of an accident,' said Ryman.

'They held me over the edge,' pleaded the boy, ashamed. 'I got scared.'

'That's nothing to what I'll do if you lie to me. I'll hang you from a meat hook, upside down by your manhood, and make sure you take a week to die. *Capisce?*'

The boy nodded.

'What've you got?' asked Ryman.

'I'm not in the inner sanctum. I'm with one of the active units. The others in my cell are an English guy called Carlisle. Ex-SAS. Mad as the moon. And

two baseheads from Inglewood.’

‘And you are?’

‘Vince Burkman. I’m just a bagman. I run errands –’

Chebb snarled and grabbed a handful of the boy’s curly hair. ‘Involving Semtex and nails,’ he screamed, pushing him back against the railing. ‘You sick freak.’

‘Yes! Yes!’ cried the boy in pain and terror. ‘Whatever you want, man.’

‘Where does Newton’s group meet?’ asked Ryman.

‘It’s need to know,’ said Vince quickly. ‘Half the time the brothers themselves don’t know where the meets are goin’ down till Newton tells them. He’s got venues right across this city. Never uses the same place more than once. He’s like a rat, you never get close.’

‘Names. Dates. Places,’ said Ryman, grabbing Vince by the neck and pushing him backwards until the scaffolding prevented him going any further.

Vince told him. A rambling five-minute list of exactly what Ryman wanted to know. Every name, every date, every place. At last the boy stopped.

‘You got everything?’ Chebb asked.

‘Too much,’ said Ryman suspiciously. He turned to Vince and gave him an apologetic look. ‘Look at it this way, at least you’ll never need a clean pair of pants now.’ Then he pushed the startled boy over the railings and watched as he plummeted, screaming, to his death.

‘He was lying,’ noted Ryman. ‘He’d have told me he killed the Kennedys if he thought that was what I wanted to hear.’ He looked over the railing to the blood-splattered pavement beneath and grimaced. ‘That was a waste of time,’ he said after a moment. ‘So, anyway, have you guys eaten yet?’

‘I’ll put the videolink through now,’ said Michelle Stonebringer as Chung Sen’s blurred features crossed the thousands of miles of cyberspace and flickered to life on Sanger’s laptop.

‘This had better be important,’ Sanger told Chung. ‘I’ve got the Mexican ambassador waiting downstairs.’

‘I think you’ll agree this is a worrying development.’

‘Spit it out.’

‘Kyla O’Shaughnessy,’ said Chung simply.

‘Whom?’

‘My assistant.’

Sanger remembered her. A pretty-faced Australian girl with tied-back hair and deep ocean-blue eyes. Early twenties. He’d met her during a visit to the Okenawa site in the spring. They’d had a conversation during which she’d told him she was a champion swimmer in her homeland, but that she didn’t

like Australia and much preferred Japan, which she described as ‘stimulating’. Chung Sen, Sanger recalled, had been very fond of her.

‘What have you done, got her pregnant?’ he asked.

‘Nothing so trivial,’ replied Chung. ‘She’s gone.’

‘Gone? What do you mean, “gone”?’

‘I mean she left the complex this afternoon and was last seen diving on to a bullet train.’

‘If there’s a point to all this, Chung, I’d really like to hear it within the next ten seconds, or I’m going to be very angry indeed.’

‘The files,’ said Chung after a slight hesitation. ‘She’s got the files. Copies of my work. The entire project.’

Sanger was silent. Chung had braced himself for an explosion of anger, of dire and over the top threats of retribution. Instead, Sanger stood up and moved away from the laptop looking out, once again, across the panoramic view of Los Angeles at night.

Chung stared at an empty seat for a long time before asking, ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘A moment,’ said Sanger offscreen.

But Chung couldn’t wait. ‘She’s got everything, layouts of the facility, the timetable for invasion . . . I don’t know why she wanted it or who she’s working for, but if that disk falls into the wrong hands, everything we’ve worked so hard for may be destroyed . . .’

Sanger sat down in front the screen again. ‘And who, exactly, are “the wrong hands”?’ he asked calmly.

‘Well . . .’

‘I’ll tell you. Everyone,’ Sanger continued. ‘Everyone but us.’

‘I’m sorry, I never suspected . . .’

‘No one ever *does* suspect spies. That’s the whole point you cretin. She played with your hormones.’ For the first time there was a trace of menace in Sanger’s voice.

Chung looked away from the screen, unable to take any more of Sanger’s wounding sarcasm. ‘What do you want me to do?’ he asked again.

‘I want you to find the disk. And anybody who might have come into contact with it. Rip Japan apart if you have to, but find that disk. What you do with her, I’ll leave up to you.’

The knock on the door of his hotel room woke the Doctor from a light and troubled sleep.

It was Tegan. She looked tired and irritable.

So, no change there then.

‘Turlough hasn’t come back yet,’ she said. ‘I’ve checked his room, his bed hasn’t been slept in.’

‘I’m sure he’ll be all right,’ said the Doctor, but he didn’t look as though he was sure of that or anything like it.

‘Based on what, exactly?’

The Doctor accepted her scepticism. ‘Yes, he *has* been known to get himself captured on the odd occasion,’ he noted with a wry grin.

‘Doctor, this is serious,’ said Tegan. ‘You should never have let him go out on his own in a strange city. You know what he’s like when he starts yabbering.’

‘I know,’ replied the Doctor. ‘But we all make mistakes. Even me. We’re only human. Figuratively speaking, of course . . .’ He picked up the telephone. ‘I think I need help,’ he admitted.

Forty-five minutes into the United National General Council seminar on the use of alien technology by Third World countries in their nuclear programmes, and Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart was beginning to daydream about the little coffee shop opposite UNIT’s second (or was it third?) central London HQ in Marble Arch. It had been years since he’d been back to see if Signor Graziani still did those wonderful bacon and cheese rolls with a nice cup of tea, all for ninety-nine pence. Almost certainly not. That’s inflation for you. Always happens when there’s a Labour government . . .

He was vaguely aware of Sir Thomas Wonga, the UN’s senior expert in the field, talking about the rumours that a Waro propulsion device had been found during a routine examination of Angola’s fusion installations when an aide tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Telephone call for you, sir. From Los Angeles.’

‘Thank the Lord for that,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart, checking his watch and working out that it would be just after eight a.m. on the West Coast. ‘I expected this an hour ago.’

‘You’re late,’ he said, picking up the phone in the lobby of the UN building in New York.

‘Sorry, Brigadier,’ said the Doctor. ‘TARDIS lag . . . You know how it is?’

‘Doctor? I apologise,’ said the Brigadier, clearly embarrassed. ‘I thought you were one of my men. What can I do for you?’

The Doctor quickly explained that Turlough had gone missing.

‘Spotty little oick,’ muttered Lethbridge-Stewart in annoyance. ‘I always said he would never amount to much. I remember one day he disrupted my maths lesson to such an extent . . .’

‘Brigadier,’ interrupted the Doctor. ‘It is rather pressing . . .’

‘I’ll do everything I can to find the boy, Doctor,’ Lethbridge-Stewart said. ‘But you must understand that manpower resources are limited and that your

investigations into InterCom must take precedence.'

'I understand,' replied the Doctor. 'I know what I'm here for. What do you want me to do?'

'I've arranged for a visit to InterCom's development laboratories by the eminent Doctor Smith of Cambridge,' replied the Brigadier. 'And his assistant.'

'Tegan will be delighted,' said the Doctor drily, putting the phone down.

He could see that Tegan was looking suspicious. 'Will I?' she asked.

'You're to be my assistant, apparently.' The Doctor produced the passes he'd been given by the Brigadier in London. 'Miss Jones, it says here.'

'*Alias, Smith and Jones,*' added Tegan with a grin. Then she noticed the concerned look on the Doctor's face. 'Don't worry about Turlough,' she said. The Doctor could tell that she was trying hard to make it sound convincing. 'He can look after himself.'

'Brave heart, Tegan,' he told his companion. 'One crisis at a time.'

Ryman was in the middle of breakfast with Chebb at Makin's bar in West Hollywood when his mobile phone spluttered into life.

'Excuse me, Bob,' he said, leaving his colleague to the sports pages of *USA Today*.

It was Jon Newton on the other end of the line.

'We have to talk,' said the Englishman.

'I thought I told you never to call me on this number,' hissed Ryman. Then he gave Chebb a cautious half-smile which the security man acknowledged by returning his attention to his newspaper and his coffee.

'It's important,' Newton told Ryman.

'So is my breakfast,' replied Ryman, switching off the phone. 'Do you ever feel like you're surrounded by incompetents?' he asked Chebb.

'Not really,' said Chebb. 'I just do what you tell me to.'

'I apologise for the early hour of this meeting,' Sanger told his assembled audience. 'And I also apologise for the sudden change of venue.' He gestured at the sparse hotel conference room. 'As you can see, we will have to make do with this facility whilst there are representatives of unfriendly powers in the area. The InterCom building itself is simply too vulnerable to attack to risk having the full conglomerate there.' Sanger paused and adjusted his tie, clearing his throat as he did so. He took a sip of water. 'And lastly, I'd like to apologise for the traffic on the freeway this morning. Unfortunately, even *my* influence has limitations.'

There was a ripple of laughter from the grey-suited group.

'I should like to thank you all for travelling at such short notice. I know that many of you were in Tokyo a few days ago and I shall be looking forward to

hearing your observations on the project. I know that Representative Bois has some strong feelings on this matter, so I've made this item two on the agenda.'

'Thank you. Paolo,' said Theydon Bois. 'I feel it's vitally important that we reach a consensus on the time scale.'

'Agreed,' said Sanger, ticking off a line on his lengthy check list. 'You'll also notice that I have Alain's European report at item four.' He glanced at Giresse and asked, 'Is that all right?'

'Oui. Not a problem.'

'Good. And we have representative reports from London and Toronto at Five and Six. Plus a business structure breakdown from Graeme Carter and the usual any other business. I expect this should take us most of the morning. I've arranged for lunch to be brought in at 12.30 if we haven't finished by then. Anybody have any preferences – fruit salad or continental buffet?'

'Either,' said Giresse.

'Michelle, make a note of that in case anybody tries to say they didn't agree later on!'

There was more sycophantic laughter and Ms Stonebringer opened her notepad.

Sanger coughed again. A look of concern crossed his features as he reached once more for the glass of water in front of him. 'Oh, great,' he said, in irritation. 'Gentlemen, it seems as though it's time I changed. Now would be an ideal opportunity to relax and slip into something more comfortable. Could somebody get the blinds. And Stephen, if you could organise the lighting.'

As the heavy blinds were drawn shutting out the daylight, Joyce switched on three powerful overhead lamps that cascaded a soft, eerie red light on to the men sitting around the oval table.

'That's better,' said one of the group as his face shredded itself apart.

Around the room the sound of tearing flesh and fusing bone and muscle could be heard. The thing that had been Sanger loosened its tie just as its chest burst through the material of his shirt.

Michelle Stonebringer looked to her left and saw that the face of the thing that had been Theydon Bois had become a pus-dripping red-raw pool of maggots. Across the table, the thing that had been Giresse was clawing the last of the facial skin from the replacement beneath it. Michelle stood and began to tidy up her papers.

'If you gentlemen wish for a moment of privacy ...' she began, a note of slight embarrassment in her voice.

'Sit,' came the sibilant reply from the thing that had been Main Giresse. 'We shall only be a moment.'

Hands became pincers, heads became huge, domed insect-like skulls with antennae and small red eyes that seemed to feed on the room's new light.

Within seconds, the entire conglomerate had been transformed.

Into something inhuman.

'*Much* better,' said the thing that had been Sanger in a rasping, barely audible whisper. 'Now we can get some real work done.'

Chapter Seven

UNIT Cutaway

In the safe house Paynter and Barrington were awakened by their bedroom shaking.

It seemed to be happening to Geoff Paynter more and more these days. That awful moment of disorientation that only the long-distance traveller experiences. The split second after awakening in the dark of a strange bedroom. The dislocation of being unaware, even if only for an instant, of what continent and time zone you are in.

His body clock was screaming at him that it was midnight and that he was in Stockholm where the bar was still open. Probably. Then he opened his eyes and saw the floor moving.

'It's an earthquake,' said the captain, rolling over and pulling his gun from beneath his pillow just in case it wasn't.

'We *are* on a fault line, you know. Somebody was telling me that they get minor ones near enough every day.' Barrington didn't seem in the least bit concerned. In fact, he hadn't even opened his eyes yet. After a few seconds, the shaking stopped. He, at least, seemed to have his brain and his body in the same hemisphere.

'I couldn't live in those conditions,' said Paynter, still trying hard to catch up.

'Is it any worse than that gaff you used to have near Baker Street tube station? I seem to remember your bed moved around the room rather a lot without much help from the forces of nature!'

Paynter smiled to himself. 'Mark. Thank you, that's the nicest compliment I've ever had,' he said, searching beside the bed for his watch. 'Your snoring hasn't improved, by the way. You want to get that seen to. Sleep apnoea can be really dangerous.'

'I'll bear that in mind, doctor,' said Barrington, pulling on a T-shirt and trying to remember where he'd left the bottle of wine they had half-finished the night before after Mel Tyrone had driven them back from the restaurant.

Once in the safe house, they had done what they usually did on the first night of a new job. Sat up until almost daybreak talking about past missions, friends they had known and lost. And about the future.

Barrington found the bottle at the foot of the bed. 'Seems a pile to waste this.'

Paynter looked at his watch and nodded. 'If you're up, it's early enough for a drink.'

'Have you ever lost a friend, Mark?'

Barrington seemed surprised by the question, particularly as it came after just two glasses of white wine. He expected Paynter to be far more pissed before reaching the introspective phase.

'How do you mean . . . lost? Seen them die?' he asked as he struggled into his trousers.

'God, no. That happens all the time, especially to us. No. I mean actually lost a friendship? Watched it crumble?' This was a minor continuation of some of the conversation from the previous evening. Barrington had an idea what was coming next.

'Can't say I have,' he said. 'Not a solid, long-lasting one. There were a few kids I used to go to school with that I lost touch with but that's not the same thing.'

'It's happened to me. Twice. One after another within about six months. I'm not talking about ships that pass in the night here. I mean people I'd known for a decade. Guys I'd been in effing life and death situations with. I always say that the true test of friendship is if you'd take a bullet for someone. Well, I'd have taken a bullet for either of these two. I *had* for one of them.'

'What happened?'

'One stiffed me over money, another one got the hump over a woman.'

'Ah,' noted Barrington wisely. 'I figured there might be a bird in there somewhere. *Cherchez la femme*, you know? That's what makes the world go round isn't it?'

Paynter didn't reply, but he wore a wounded little boy, 'someone's got it in for me' expression. Barrington laughed. 'Whenever they're feeling insecure, if they can't let it out they'll pick on you,' he said.

'It's not quite that simple,' replied Paynter. 'I know the kind of reputation I have around the barracks, Mark, there's no need to sugar-coat it. And I know how canteen culture can make all that nonsense seem worse than it is. What can I say? I'm a complicated fellah.'

'Course you are, skipper,' agreed Barrington.

'The point is,' said Paynter after a long silence, 'I know I'm not easy to be around.'

'What do you want me to say?' asked Barrington. 'That that's not true?'

'Why would I want you to say that?'

Barrington sighed deeply. It was going to be another one of *those* discussions. ‘That’s how this type of conversation normally goes, isn’t it?’ he began. ‘Somebody bares their soul and says something self-deprecating. The person they’re talking to now has the choice of agreeing with them, which could lead to anger and betrayal. Or they can tell them they’re not whatever it is they think they are, thus lying to save a friendship. A prawn cocktail offensive, or being economical with the truth. Can you clue me up on which you’d prefer, because I don’t want to say the wrong thing?’

Paynter seemed to spend an age considering this. ‘Betrayal,’ he noted. ‘Interesting word.’

‘Yes, so is “bullshit”. They’re quite close to each other in the dictionary.’

‘Touché,’ said Paynter.

Barrington was having none of it. ‘You’ll be getting to the “looking wistfully out of windows and banging on about how they used to build ships on that river” stage shortly, I expect,’ he urged.

‘Listen, mate,’ Paynter said. ‘Working-class sentiment is just an indulgence of working-class people who’ve cracked it through football or rock and roll. It’s not my style.’

‘Whatever,’ muttered Barrington. Then he began to laugh, quietly to himself.

Paynter was immediately on the defensive. ‘Share the joke?’ he snapped.

‘Actually,’ said Barrington, ‘I was just thinking about Wolfgang.’

Paynter was bemused at the way the conversation had drifted away from a serious discussion into something so trivial. Then he also began to laugh. ‘Whatever happened to old Wolfgang?’ he asked.

‘Got his promotion to major and went back to Germany, I think,’ replied Barrington. ‘I’m still not entirely sure how he managed to get through the promotion board with that awkward speech impediment of his . . .’

Paynter sniggered in agreement. ‘Not being able to pronounce your Rs is a bit of a drawback for a commanding officer,’ he noted. His amusement was shared by his partner. ‘Remember that fiasco down at Waterloo Station? That “Death of Yesterday” malarkey?’

‘Can I ever forget it?’ Barrington asked. ‘It’s not often you get an order to “Westwain the Waston wawwior wobot”!’

Their uncontrollable laughter continued for several minutes, punctuated by occasional gasps for breath, until finally Paynter pulled himself together, jumped up from his bed and rushed out of the room. ‘Bags me first in the shower,’ he said, leaping through the door before his friend could react.

‘You bastard,’ shouted Barrington. ‘You had it first in Berlin.’

‘RHIP matey,’ replied Paynter, popping his head back through the door and throwing his underpants at Barrington. ‘See if you can find any clean towels.’

* * *

'I used to be stationed at Strategic Operations Defence in Geneva,' said Paynter as they finished the wine with a breakfast of toasted bagels and peanut butter.

'Brilliant acronym, I always thought,' noted Barrington.

Paynter gave a noncommittal grunt. 'You know what a notice to attend a conference was called?'

'Yes, the *SODN*. I went to one in 1993. Terribly dull.'

'I was on reception. I had to ask all these captains and majors if they had their *SODN* papers,' continued Paynter.

Barrington hadn't heard this one before. 'To which they replied ...?' he asked.

'Usually, "Yes, I soddin' have!" True story.'

'My first overseas posting was in the Icelandic HQ. *That was fun.*' Barrington fixed his gun holster under his left shoulder, and made a series of rapid practice draws in front of the mirror before putting on his lightweight jacket.

'Much to do in Reykjavik on a Friday night?' asked Paynter.

'Not a lot. Counting icebergs was quite popular with the chaps ...'

Paynter went for the jugular. 'And you accuse *me* of being stereotypical?!'

'You're just challenged.'

'Trainspotter!' replied Paynter.

'Headbanger!'

Jacqueline Maguire was right about you, you know. You want to get a life,' said Paynter wickedly. 'Especially after she biffed you in the kisser in Sydney when you said how well stacked she was.'

'Lieutenant Maguire is a highly competent soldier,' said Barrington. 'And a very intelligent, witty and charming young woman.'

'And a lesbian,' continued Paynter with a snigger.

'As it happens,' noted Barrington, somewhat embarrassed. 'Yes, you are correct in your assumption about her orientation. Come on Geoff, you should be beyond homophobic crap like that. It's not the 1970s anymore. And Johnny Benton doesn't run the show around HQ. *We do.*'

'Fair point,' noted Paynter. 'I mean, don't get me wrong ... I like feminists, really I do. I consider myself one, actually. It's just when they start forming their own football teams to get into the Premier League that I lose interest. I mean, they've got effing Tottenham Hotspur already, what more do they want?!'

Barrington began to laugh but stopped when Paynter sank the knife in further.

'I thought it was ironic that you, of all people, tried it on with Jackie. It was so funny!'

'Shut your gob!'

'Excuse me?' asked Paynter.

‘My apologies. Shut your gob, sir!’

‘Better,’ noted Paynter, spitting the remains of his wine into the kitchen sink. ‘You can drive. I want to do some sightseeing!’

Southern California in July is dominated by a single colour. Brown. The vegetation is brown. The grass is brown. The sky, after a couple of hours of traffic fumes being belched into it, is brown.

They drove down the Pacific Highway and along Mulholland Drive, into the hills high above Bel Air in a UNIT-rented Chevy with the top down and a tape of the Sex Pistols blasting. The air was hot as the sun rose in the early morning sky, but it hadn’t quite reached the brown stage yet when the two UNIT men produced pairs of identical Ray-Bans.

‘We used to listen to this out in the desert,’ said Paynter as they climbed a steep stretch of twisting road.

‘When was that?’

‘1981. I spent six weeks in the Kalahari with a special forces unit on a bug-hunt.’

‘I never knew that,’ said Barrington. He was learning a lot of surprising new facts about his friend today.

‘You’ve heard about the Official Secrets Act. I take it?’ asked Paynter.

‘What was the target?’

Paynter was silent for a moment, trying hard to remember. ‘Zygons, I think. There were a few hundred of them left over from the invasion. We went in with an artillery battalion but they’d gone to ground. We spent days tracking them. Picking off a few at a time.’

‘Listening to the Pistols . . .?’

‘One of the lads had some cassettes with him. All there was to do at night. That and sit and watch the sunset, smoking kif. Which was an experience in itself. You had to take your shovel with you every time you wanted a crap. It was one of the best six weeks of my life!’ noted Paynter.

‘I was doing my basic training in 1981. The first bug-hunt I saw was clearing up after the Ice Warriors fiasco in Northampton.’

‘I remember that. I was with Harry Sullivan’s broadsword team at Porton Down when all that was happening.’

By ten o’clock they had arrived at the elaborate wrought-iron gates to InterCom’s Studio City headquarters. From a distance the complex looked like a theme park. An impressive monorail track ran around the outside whilst, within, towering skyscraper blocks battled for prominence with a garish ninety-foot-high representation of the company logo in concrete and glass.

‘Is anybody thinking *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at this point?’ asked Barrington, parking the car.

'No,' said Paynter flatly. 'I'm thinking "someone's got a very small penis".'

'I wouldn't be so crude,' said Barrington. But he was forced to agree. Somebody's ego was clearly being stroked here. 'What's the plan, skipper?'

'Mingle with the tourists. See what presents itself, yeah?'

'Sounds good. You got the camera?'

'Check,' noted Paynter, patting his pocket.

The monorail tour was one of the most frightening experiences of Geoff Paynter's life. Not the height, or the speed of the train, but rather the inane drivel that spewed out of the speaker just above his head for the entire thirty-five-minute journey. A breathless stream of facts, figures and statistics about InterCom's worldwide organisation, mixed with a sycophantic eulogy to Paolo Sanger, that was part Disney showmanship and part Nuremberg rally. By the time the monorail finally arrived back at the main visitor centre Paynter felt genuinely nauseous.

'Could you believe that?' he asked Barrington as they walked down the ramp to where the guided tour of the facility started.

'Wasn't paying much attention,' noted Barrington. 'The scenery was quite nice and I was thinking about James Rankin.'

'Drill sergeant from Devesham? Known to every recruit that's ever been through there as "Stinker" on account of his considerable pong?'

'Yes. He was as much a mentor to me as John Benton was to you. He taught me a very basic lesson about alien attack.'

'Kick 'em where it hurts?' asked Paynter in total seriousness. 'Obviously. But also, never let them distract you with scientific gobbledegook.'

Paynter was horrified. 'That's a bit namby-pamby for Stinker Jimmy. He was supposed to be a hard case.'

'He was,' replied Barrington. 'Still is actually, I saw him three weeks ago. He still gives out the same advice, and he's got a higher avoidance of casualties ratio than any trainer in UNIT history. Very proud of that statistic he is.'

'Your point being?'

'That nonsense in there had all the hallmarks of indoctrination techniques.'

'You are not serious?' asked Paynter incredulously. 'They were just being American!'

Barrington halted Paynter and indicated towards the herd of people filing past them from the train. 'Look at them,' he urged. 'They're brain-numbered.'

'I'm not surprised after *that*.'

'Exactly. They're like sheep now. Malleable. Open to autosuggestion. It's exactly the same technique the Time Meddler used in the Seventies with that pop concert malarkey. Come on, Geoff, you were around then ...'

‘Yes,’ said Paynter slowly. ‘I can see the validity of your argument.’ He stared blankly at Barrington, with a fixed smile on his face. ‘You make a persuasive case.’

‘Geoff . . . ?’

Paynter laughed. ‘You soft tart. I had you going there! Autosuggestion my foot!’

‘I hate you,’ said Barrington, turning away from Paynter. ‘If I ever win the lottery, the first thing I’m gonna do is have an Islamic jihad put out on your arse.’

‘Oooh. Touchy,’ said Paynter, putting a consoling arm around Barrington’s shoulders.

‘Get knotted,’ Barrington said, shrugging off the arm.

‘Don’t get a lip-on with me, Mary Poppins,’ said Paynter. ‘We’re here to do a job.’

But as they travelled around in a group of thirty tourists with an official InterCom guide, Paynter couldn’t help thinking that maybe (just maybe) there was an element of validity in Barrington’s theory. The guide was using similar phrases to those Paynter had heard on the monorail train, and in a disquietingly monotone fashion, her voice never rising or falling below a certain pitch. Soft. Calming.

‘See,’ whispered Barrington at one point, and Paynter nodded in agreement.

‘There’s a men’s room over there,’ he said. ‘Let’s make our excuses . . .’

‘Wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes,’ said Paynter as he and Barrington stuck their heads out of the toilet window to see that their group had departed.

‘Told you,’ said Barrington, still obviously hurt.

‘No, not the prestidigitation. I mean the individual flushes on the urinals. And that little plastic thing in the piss-pot with “Say No to Drugs” on it.’

‘Strangeness abounds in these parts,’ Barrington agreed. ‘I thought that a lot of the things they said at the acclimatisation centre were just urban legends, you know? But most of them are true.’

‘Always trust what UNIT tells you!’ Paynter noted ironically.

They set off in the opposite direction to the tourists through the now deserted amphitheatre and soon found themselves in an area well away from the public. Although their conversation continued, they were now constantly aware of their surroundings.

‘Do you see much of Richie Simcox?’ asked Barrington as they rounded a corner and then quickly ducked back behind it when they saw three Intercom security men talking at the far end of a narrow passage between outbuildings.

'Nah, not for a good few months,' whispered Paynter. 'He had keyhole surgery after his wife shot him, but he never really recovered. Became a bit of a victim of dependency culture. Last I heard he sits around the house most of the day watching the *State Secrets* video on the Cyber invasion. Bit of an embarrassment really.'

'There but for the grace of God . . .' noted Barrington.

'Yeah,' said Paynter, risking a nervous glance around the corner. The coast was clear. 'But that's the price you have to pay if you get caught playing away from home in the eternal triangle, wouldn't you say?'

'It was a bit drastic though,' Barrington added, following Paynter. 'I sympathise with her. It can't be much fun finding your bloke in bed with a redhead from admin . . . But taking his Browning and giving him a kneecapping? That's not cricket really, is it?'

'She always was highly strung, that Celia. Fine-looking woman but, you know, a bit barmy.' Paynter paused. 'Someone's coming, go left.'

He dived through a door, followed a second later by Barrington. They stood behind it, their backs pressed against the cold metal as the sound of boots crunching on gravel faded away from them.

Neither spoke for at least a minute until Barrington asked. 'Where are we?'

'Looks like a warehouse,' said Paynter, noting the presence of numerous packing crates. And so it appeared. Or, at least, it had been once upon a time. Now it was empty, smelling of dust. Of neglect and engine oil. A minimum of daylight streaming through a high window, dirty and stained with aeons of grime, allowed Paynter and Barrington to see a wooden staircase at the far end of the hangar.

Barrington looked towards the window but could see very little. Just a million tiny something or others, caught in the cross wires of the streaming sunlight and the drifting air. 'Check the stairs, skipper.'

Paynter moved across the vast open space and then winced as he put his weight on the first step and the wood let out a groan of disapproval. 'Not very user friendly,' he noted.

'Shhh,' said Barrington, following him, gun in hand ready for action.

'Really?' whispered Paynter. 'Thanks, mate, I'd never have thought of that!'

He climbed the stairs and, on reaching the top, tried to wipe the dirt from a window that looked into whatever was beyond the warehouse. He was silent for a moment, even when some of the trapped light forced its way through the glass and reflected on to his face.

'What is it?' asked Barrington as he saw Paynter's jaw visibly drop.

'You'd never believe me if I told you,' said Paynter. 'Have a butcher's at this!'

Barrington bounded up the stairs, oblivious to the creaking beneath his feet.

Paynter was right. He *would* never have believed it.

Beneath them, through the window, was a 'clean room' similar to the kind they had both seen at Porton Down. Numerous white-coated technicians wearing contamination suits scurried about like white ants around a cylindrical, cigar-shaped object two hundred yards long.

The object was pinkish-red in colour, though at points it seemed almost translucent. At its centre pulsed a throbbing strobe of light that was compellingly hypnotic to the watching UNIT men. At its base a row of small, brilliantly white lights revolved in a seemingly perpetual circumnavigation, each circuit lasting exactly eighteen seconds. At its apex the vehicle – for that's undoubtedly what it was – had a jagged section missing from the fuselage through which poured a shaft of green light that stretched up towards the rafters of the clean room.

'If that isn't a space capsule, then I'm my Aunt Fanny,' said Paynter.

Even Mark Barrington didn't have a pithy comeback to that.

Chapter Eight

Semantic Spaces

The little man whistling a tune inside Turlough's brain had obviously forgotten the words. Turlough's head ached. No ... Ache was too dreary a word to describe just how badly it hurt. The thesaurus in his mind went into overdrive. Distress, discomfort, anguish, misery, agony. That only made the pain worse; let's stick with ache for the time being he told himself.

He opened his eyes, but they simply refused to focus.

Fair enough.

The only sensation they allowed through to his muddled brain was white.

A moment later he tried again, and this time his senses decided to try and co-operate. But it was hard work. He was in a white room.

Right, got that.

And he was naked.

That was a surprise.

Turlough propped himself up on one elbow despite his head screaming its protest. The floor was padded, as were the walls. A little smaller, and it would have been womb-like and Turlough could comfortably have curled up into a foetal position and stayed there for ever.

Then the sensory bombardment started and Turlough knew what real cephalic pain was all about.

The sonic attack came in waves of rippling noise that skewered him on to his back and pinned him to the floor. His hands flew, instinctively, to his ears where he could feel the blood dribbling out. His eyes clamped tightly shut and his body went rigid as he felt as though his skull must surely explode.

Finally, it stopped.

Turlough opened his eyes. The pain in his head was gone, as though the sonic attack had shaken every atom in his body clean of the drugs that polluted his system. For a moment, just a moment, he allowed himself to breath out, slowly.

'Why are you doing this to me?' he stammered. There was no reply.

He felt a warm sensation on his torso. He stole a glance down at his body and was horrified to see a red pinpoint of light concentrated on his rib cage. He spun over and curled into a ball. Seconds later, he felt the laser slash

across his back. He screamed and struggled to stand, but his legs gave way beneath him and he slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor as the laser was joined by others at various sensitive points on his body.

'Stop it,' he screamed. 'You're cooking me alive.'

This time there was a reply. A monotone, female voice.

'Stay where you are. No harm will come to you.'

Turlough, strangely, didn't believe her.

Tyrone still wasn't entirely sure why he'd been asked to drive the Doctor up Coldwater Canyon Avenue to the peak of the Santa Monica hills behind Greystone Park. The Doctor, however had been very specific about the destination.

'You've been in the city before?' asked Tyrone.

'A lifetime ago. Or four,' replied the Doctor, studying a map of the Los Angeles area. 'It has changed a lot. I want to get my bearings. This is probably the easiest way.'

'Big city,' noted Tyrone.

'In reality it's about five cities all welded together into a glutinous lump of humanity,' said the Doctor. 'People tend to gravitate towards each other in masses. Then when they've arrived at wherever it is that they're going they spend their time building walls around themselves. Locking themselves inside little boxes until they get ready for the littlest box of all.'

'A cheerful thought.'

'It's not a cheerful world, Mr Tyrone,' the Doctor said sadly. 'A beautiful world, certainly. One of my favourites. But ...'

Tyrone nodded wisely. 'Population transplant?'

'You've been talking to Tegan,' noted the Doctor, amused.

'Quite a remarkable young woman,' said Tyrone.

The Doctor couldn't help but smile. 'She's certainly that. We've been together for a long time. I don't know what I'd do without her.'

Tyrone was puzzled. 'Forgive me Doctor, but I know *what* you are.'

'I don't follow.'

'You're regularly accompanied by companions ...'

Now the Doctor understood. 'Companionship is a quintessential part of life. Without it, we are alone. Tegan provides me with a link to the realities of the universe. She's the soul of the TARDIS. And the heart. A brave heart.'

'And Turlough?' asked Tyrone, stopping the car.

'He was sent to kill me. I greatly admired that!'

Tyrone gestured towards the seething metropolis below them. 'The City of Angels.'

'... And devils,' added the Doctor with a shake of his head. 'Magnificent scenery, spoiled by mankind. Your world in microcosm!'

‘Don’t you think you’re being a little unfair on us?’ asked Tyrone.

‘Probably,’ said the Doctor. ‘I always try to be optimistic about the future, but the things I’ve seen . . .’ His voice trailed away as with his arm he traced a path between North Hollywood and Van Nuys, then on towards Sherman Oaks. ‘All this useless beauty. All these great leaps forward. And for what? So that the first alien with an advanced degree in interplanetary warfare can take it all from you? And life just simply moves along and nothing changes.’ There was real emotion in the Doctor’s voice now. ‘I sometimes believe that I’m the only innocent in a universe full of cynicism. I feel like Ferdinand Magellan or Amerigo Vespucci on a voyage of discovery. Only I’m shining a light on things that maybe should be left in the darkness.’

‘A man out of time?’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, amused. ‘*There’s* the irony!’

Mel Tyrone knew exactly what the next question shouldn’t be, but he asked it anyway. ‘So, you think we ask for all our troubles with the neighbours?’

The Doctor, rightly, ignored the question and swung round, keeping his arm ramrod straight like a Dalek’s eyepiece, pointing out towards the Pacific. ‘Santa Monica, correct?’

‘It is.’

‘Good. Then Bel Air, then Westwood, then Beverly Hills?’

‘Geography Major at the university of Gallifrey?’

‘Temporal mechanics, quantum physics, fourth-dimensional tachyon studies. I scraped through. I was a grave disappointment to my parents.’ The Doctor flashed a broad beaming smile at Tyrone. ‘Someone asked me once why I travel the universe in a craft that should have been put into mothballs millennia ago. I told them that there is great evil out there, inconceivable evil. And that it must be fought.’

‘Do you still believe that?’ asked Tyrone.

‘That it’s there, or that it must be fought?’

‘The former’s self-evident, surely.’

‘So is the latter Mr Tyrone,’ said the Doctor brightly. ‘And whilst that state of affairs remains, then so will I.’

‘Press “alt”, “control” and “delete”. That usually clears it.’

‘Rabbits!’ exclaimed Tegan, her panic that she had deleted UNIT’s entire database only gradually subsiding. ‘I *hate* computers. I’m from the 1980s, we found washing machines a challenge.’

Sergeant Milligan clearly thought she was joking and Tegan didn’t bother to get angry with him. Actually, she liked him a lot. He was relaxed and chatty, an Englishman abroad – ex-navy he told her – who worked at UNIT headquarters in downtown Los Angeles. He had arrived at the hotel shortly after the

Doctor left with Mr Tyrone. He had orders to escort Tegan to headquarters. They had, he told her, an important job to do.

That job turned out to be spending over an hour trawling through thousands of computer files on InterCom and its subsidiaries. Not that Tegan minded particularly, she wanted to help. It was just that her numerous elementary errors had obviously convinced the dashing young Sergeant Milligan that she was a feeble-minded *banana*. She could tell that he was thinking *what the hell is the Doctor playing at? Doing all his kooky intergalactic stuff with this Australian airhead?*

Her computer bleeped at her once more and Tegan blushed. Her eyes, briefly, made contact with Milligan again.

‘OK over there?’

‘Couldn’t be better,’ she said through gritted teeth. *He thinks you’re a dunderhead.* ‘Err ... How do I get out of this page?’ *A complete jelly-brained nincompoop!*

‘Escape key. Top left-hand side of the keyboard.’

‘Thanks.’ *A gormless drongo!* ‘Sorry.’ *Oh, for God’s sake, get a grip, you prawn!* ‘Got it,’ said Tegan, triumphantly as the page scrolled forward on to the next file, a newspaper report on the InterCom subsidiary Gathercole and Truslove PLC.

‘You got a headache yet?’ asked Milligan.

‘Not half. You?’

‘For the last twenty minutes,’ he grinned. ‘Want to take a break?’

There was a canteen on the fourth floor with a view of the Capitol Records building and the Hollywood Bowl beyond.

‘Aren’t you going to ask what a nice English guy like me is doing in a place like this?’ asked David Milligan, lighting a cigarette as Tegan poured milk into her coffee. He was small, but could obviously handle himself. Tegan sensed that his humour was a defensive barrier of some kind, though she couldn’t quite work out what it was protecting. Or why. He seemed to be about the most balanced and sane UNIT person she’d ever met.

‘Any reason why I should?’ she asked.

‘No. I’m just dying for someone to!’ Milligan said. ‘I drive every visitor we get over here and no one ever asks, “So, how’d you end up in LA?”’

‘So how’d you end up in LA?!’

‘Funny story actually,’ began Milligan with a smirk. ‘It involves a woman ...’

‘As is usually the case,’ said Tegan. ‘Tell me something, how did InterCom manage to get so powerful so quickly? Didn’t anybody do anything to stop them?’

‘That’s a funny story too. It wasn’t in anybody’s interest to get in their way. They were providing cutting-edge technology for very low prices. InterCom gave everybody what they wanted. Anything that could be viewed, or read, or played with. With the Chinese getting interested in space in such a big way, it was to the West’s advantage to have a company that also had its sights set on outer space. Even if it was just to throw up more satellites that could beam back more of their crappy TV shows to more and more countries. It’s called cultural imperialism and we’ve had a gutfull of it these last few years. It was only once InterCom had a worldwide monopoly that people began to realise the dangers involved in a company that runs everything.’

Tegan was horrified. But she knew her history, however much time travel tried to mess it up for her. ‘What about International Electromatics?’ she asked. ‘You’d think people would have learned lessons from that.’

‘Sadly, some lessons have to be learned twice,’ said Milligan.

The Doctor and Tyrone arrived back at UNIT headquarters moments later. The building was a nondescript five-storey office block above a video store and a 7-11 and could be entered through little doors hidden behind a metal pull-down shutter in the back alley off Melrose Avenue.

‘We haven’t had to change location in twenty years.’ noted Tyrone. ‘The crack dealers keep any butt-ins away. Nice bit of serendipity that we couldn’t have arranged if we’d tried.’

Inside, a spiral staircase led to an impressively spacious second-floor reception and an implausibly tall young woman wearing designer jeans and a Neiman-Marcus T-shirt. She stood to attention behind her desk and saluted as Tyrone and the Doctor came through the door, her blonde hair falling in a fringe over her eyes. She swept the hair back and tried to look militaristic. It wasn’t working.

Tyrone suppressed his amusement. ‘At ease, Private Wooldridge.’

‘Very good sir,’ she said with a strongly Home Counties English accent, flopping down into her high-backed swivel chair.

‘As you can see, we don’t get too many visitors,’ said Tyrone drily.

The Doctor approached the girl and held out his hand. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

‘Ohmigod,’ exclaimed Private Wooldridge.

‘Natalie,’ said Tyrone quickly. ‘Calm down.’

‘I am so sorry. You must think I’m an idiot. It’s just, I’ve never met a . . .’ She paused. ‘Well, I mean, you know . . .’ She stammered to a halt and muttered something about ‘deep breaths’. ‘Doctor,’ she began strongly, ‘I apologise for my racist outburst. It’s an honour to meet you. I believe you knew my uncle. Martin Beresford?’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘How is the major?’

'Retired and living on the Isle of Wight. He got me the job and . . .'

'Natalie,' interrupted Tyrone quickly. 'Are Sergeant Milligan and Miss Jovanka here?' Natalie Wooldridge nodded. 'Good, could you let them know that we've arrived, and bring them to my office?'

Tyrone guided the Doctor into a crescent-shaped room with an outstanding view over the rear entrance to a pair of Chinese restaurants and several shuttered-up business premises. 'You're right,' Tyrone said, anticipating what the Doctor was about to say. 'It's a dump. But it's very cheap. Sorry about Natalie, she's a good girl but easily bored if the job is mundane, which it usually is, and overexcited if it isn't. Beresford ended up as a full colonel and he got her assigned to us a couple of years ago. She's quite useful, particularly for undercover work. Anybody in this town will hire an English secretary. It's the accent!'

'Including InterCom?'

The UNIT chief nodded. 'She's temped there off and on for six months. Three-quarters of what we know about the company comes from Natalie. Don't let first appearances fool you, she has a real talent for getting people to tell her all kinds of classified information.'

There was a soft knock on the door and Private Wooldridge entered, followed by Tegan and Milligan.

'Please join us,' the Doctor said as Natalie made to leave. 'I understand that you're our expert on Mr Sanger.'

'I met him once,' noted Natalie. 'At a party. He was very nice.'

'It's been my experience that most people who want to destroy the world are. At first.'

'He's a very unusual person. Has a great love of abstract art. Listens to African tribal music.'

'Well that's it,' said Tegan, ironically. 'He's obviously evil!'

'Tegan,' snapped the Doctor. 'I'm sorry,' he told Natalie. 'Do continue.'

'I'm afraid there's not much more to tell,' she said nervously. 'Most of the day-to-day affairs of the company are handled by a man called Joyce, or the head of the European division, Giresse. There are a whole bunch of other important members of the conglomerate who . . .'

'The what?' asked the Doctor.

'The conglomerate. That's what the board of directors are known as throughout the company.'

'Does that mean anything to you, Doctor?' asked Tyrone.

The Doctor seemed to have become lost in a labyrinth of tangled thoughts. 'It might,' he said absent-mindedly. 'This . . . conglomerate. They control the activities of the research and development department, yes?'

‘That’s what everybody says,’ Natalie agreed. ‘There’s a companywide agenda that maximum resources are given to the work that Dr Lewis and Professor Sen are involved in.’

‘Chung Sen?’ asked the Doctor quickly, and with considerable surprise.

‘Yes. He’s in charge of the Tokyo project.’

‘Oh dear,’ said the Doctor, a worried look on his face. ‘That’s not good news at all.’

At the door of the warehouse Mark Barrington felt he had to ask the obvious question.

‘Why?’

‘Well *I* don’t know, do I?’ hissed Captain Paynter in irritation. ‘And I can’t say I’m keen on going in there to ask them either. “Excuse me matey, you couldn’t tell me why you’ve got a sodding great spacecraft locked up in a hangar in the middle of LA?” And I’ll lay you odds of several hundred to one that *that* isn’t part of the space tourism programme!’

‘But . . .’ began Barrington.

‘This had better be a really impressive “but” Mark!’

‘It’s mind-boggling,’ said Barrington.

‘And the Autons replicating important figures in world government wasn’t?! You’re really getting adept at stating the effing obvious these days, aren’t you?’

‘They must be using it for military purposes.’

Paynter was amused. ‘No shit, Sherlock?!’

‘This is *serious*.’

‘Damn right it is,’ noted Paynter. ‘We’ve got to contact HQ and let them know that whatever they think InterCom is playing at, it’s ten times worse.’

The briefing in Tyrone’s office continued with a viewing of the video that Paynter and Barrington had brought with them from Europe. Lots of out-of-focus camcorder sequences of company installations in Paris, Luxembourg, Prague and Vienna. Some of the material was fascinating, most was trivial. It ended with brief footage of a company football match.

‘They beat the Liechtenstein national side 11-0 in a friendly,’ said Milligan, following the action closely. ‘It made all the papers. There’s some talk of them trying to get into the World Cup. Oooh, nice goal!’

‘The lights Natalie,’ said Tyrone, switching off the video. ‘Well, that told us nothing that we didn’t already know.’

‘Other than the fact that they’re a worldwide organisation with massive resources and that they’re up to something,’ noted the Doctor. ‘Chung Sen’s presence is a surprise though.’

‘You know him?’ asked Tyrone.

The Doctor rooted around in his memory once again and came up with a trump card. 'We met once, in the 1970s when he was working on a tachyon-field generator. A brilliant man, one of the finest minds this world has produced in centuries. Another Galileo. Another Copernicus.'

'Then how come I've never heard of him?' asked Tegan.

'Because the man is a scurrilous rapsallion with the morality of a rattlesnake,' said the Doctor candidly.

'Not a fan?' asked Milligan.

'Not really,' replied the Doctor. 'I think it's time we paid this company a visit.'

Paynter and Barrington slipped out of the warehouse and moved inconspicuously through a jigsaw maze of avenues and cul-de-sacs until they found themselves back in a public area. Slowing their pace, they mingled with the crowds near the exit.

'Nice and easy,' said Paynter. 'Don't want to draw attention to ourselves.'

'How many shots did you take of that thing?'

'Twenty. Twenty-five. Enough. Right, let's get moving before our luck runs out.'

'You're sure that's them?' Paolo Sanger asked as he watched Paynter and Barrington on a security-camera monitor in his office. The pair were now attached to the back of a group of tourists, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were being observed.

'Ninety-nine per cent certain,' noted Ryman, standing behind Sanger. 'They look like the military.'

'Not enough.'

'What about the fact that they disappeared from the group they were with and then reappeared with another group half an hour later?'

'That's a touch more conclusive,' said Sanger. 'OK, get somebody up on the roof and take them out.'

Ryman was incredulous. 'What, in full view?'

'Why not? We announce it's gang-related. It'll be a good news story if nothing else. You know what they say . . . there's no such thing as bad publicity.'

Milligan drove the Doctor and Tegan the short distance from headquarters to the InterCom facility.

'They've given us a pass to get into the nonpublic area,' he said.

'Unusual?' asked Tegan.

'Unique in my experience. It's easier to get behind the scenes at Disneyland than it is to see around this place.'

As if to prove Milligan's point, as they reached a wire gate weighed down with Keep Out notices the car was immediately surrounded by five heavily armed guards.

'State the purpose of your visit,' yelled one, pointing a semiautomatic pistol through the car window at Milligan. The sergeant merely smiled and held out the laminated pass. 'Very good sir,' shouted the guard, removing the gun and saluting. 'Follow me this way please.'

'Ex-military,' said Milligan, as the car moved through the opening gates. 'Smells a mile away. Probably special forces or navy seals. They offer these guys small fortunes to join their happy band of armed to the teeth, jackbooted bully-boys, with the incentive of a bit of freelance thuggery on the side. Got to say, I've been tempted to offer my services once or twice.' He caught sight of Tegan's horrified expression. 'Joke,' he continued. 'Not for all the tea in China. These guys see too much. The missing-in-action rate has to be seen to be believed.'

'The more I see of this company the less I like it,' said the Doctor. 'I deplore arrogance. I think it's time I took them down a peg or two.'

'Thirty seconds,' Hayley Tonkin noted with a look at her watch.

From the vantage point of the InterCom car park she, Newton and Dunkley could see across the public area towards the main office building which was situated immediately behind the company logo centrepiece.

"'Plague, Famine, Death by the soldier's hand. The century approaches renewal,'" said Newton eagerly. 'I love the smell of burning capitalists in the morning.'

'This is going to be *large!*' noted Nigel Dunkley, almost leaping up and down at the prospect.

'Ten seconds.'

'Get ready to move as soon as it goes up. The place will be crawling with filth.'

'Three. Two. One.'

Silence.

Newton waited several seconds before turning to Hayley. 'I'm waiting . . .'

'It hasn't gone off,' she said, somewhat redundantly.

'I *am* aware of this. Bloody typical . . . if you want a job doing, do it . . .'

 But Newton never finished his sentence.

On the roof of one of InterCom's secondary buildings Robert Chebb lay flat on his stomach, looking down the eyepiece of a high-velocity rifle. The sight was trained just above the heart of one of the men he was hunting.

'Target locked,' he whispered into the mouthpiece of his radio headset. Chebb was thinking, as he always did at these moments, of the faces of all of the people he had eliminated. In Vietnam, Africa, the Lebanon, the Falkland Islands, the Gulf. His finger tightened on the trigger and he felt a rush of adrenaline flood through his body. This was what made the job worthwhile; the moment when you got to play dice with cosmos and life and death was a matter of pure mathematics.

'It only takes a bullet,' he continued, as the seconds ticked away. He raised the sight a fraction of an inch for the head shot. 'Good kill.'

And then a wall of flame stood between himself and the target and Chebb felt cheated.

'We're home and dry,' began Paynter but, like Newton, he never got to finish what he was saying. A shimmering wave of heat was rushing towards him. Burning air, thousands of degrees hot.

'Drop,' screamed Barrington, grasping his friend's arm and diving for cover.

It was only then that the sound came. A huge, enveloping whoosh of noise that built and built and built . . .

'Keep your head down,' Paynter told no one in particular. Automatic reactions took over. He'd been in a bomb blast before, in Londonderry. He knew the drill. The aftershock that seemed to tear at the skin. Then the debris. Fragments of glass and metal everywhere. Paynter was dimly aware that a three-inch chunk of one or the other had embedded itself in the soft earth mere inches from his head. But now wasn't the time to think about random causality. Just keep your head down and calculate the odds later.

Chebb stood up. Below him the entire centrepiece of the InterCom communal area was a burning mass. Through the smoke and the heat haze he could see bodies littered everywhere. Some twitched and clung to life. Others didn't.

His face was impassive. He pushed his headset back into place. A crackle and hiss of static greeted him.

'Alpha Two. Alpha Two. We have a situation here. I repeat. We have a situation here.'

In the observation room Sanger had ripped his headset off as the amplified noise of the explosion came through. In front of him all the monitors were blank, rolling lines of interference instead of clear pictures.

He turned to Ryman. The bigger man had an amused look on his face.

'What's so funny?' asked Sanger.

'They've really got it in for us,' replied Ryman.

'Whom?'

‘The Sons of Nostradamus. You’ve got to admire their chicanery!’

Sanger didn’t say anything. At that moment, Chebb’s voice crackled through the headset on the desk.

Ryman quickly picked it up. ‘What can you see?’

‘Carnage.’

Newton was the first to pick himself up in the car park. Even at this distance, debris from the blast surrounded him and his companions. His blue velvet jacket was covered in specks of dust and charred fragments of concrete. He brushed himself down and then turned towards InterCom.

What he saw made him gasp.

There was a mushroom cloud, a plume of black dust, where the logo centrepiece had once stood. Around it was a plethora of tiny fires. There were bodies burning everywhere. The air stank of barbecued flesh. Newton put his hand on his knees, doubled up and vomited all over his suede shoes.

He felt a hand on his back. It was Nigel.

‘We done it man,’ said Nigel, his face black with soot. ‘We’ve only been and gone and done it!’

Hayley was in the car, revving the engine. She stuck her head out of the window and bellowed at the pair.

Newton staggered towards the car, laughing maniacally. “‘The kingdom shall fall, with great sorrow!’” he shouted. ‘It is written!’

‘Get in. We have to be somewhere else,’ cried Hayley.

‘It is written,’ repeated Newton as he stumbled into the passenger seat and the car sped off. “‘Blood, fire, flood. A surprise to the Great One. Evil shall befall him, and he shall prove unworthy!’”

‘You all right?’ asked Barrington, standing over Paynter’s prone body.

‘Buggered if I know,’ replied Paynter, spitting out whatever foreign body it was that had managed to find its way into his mouth. ‘Gimme half an hour and my ears might have stopped ringing by then.’

‘We have to go,’ said Barrington. Around him dazed, bewildered and shocked people were beginning to rise from the ground. Many though, weren’t rising.

‘Innit marvellous?’ asked Paynter spinning on to his back and sitting up. ‘Bleeding outrageous, so it is. You come out for a nice quiet day sightseeing ...’

‘Come on Geoff,’ said Barrington, ignoring the pain in his shoulder and helping his captain to stand up.

Paynter glanced towards the place where the InterCom logo had once stood. Now there was only an obscene parody of the original structure.

'Well,' he noted, 'at least if one thing's come out of this, it's that they got rid of that bloody sculpture. I'll bet it was art lovers!'

Turlough had lost all sense of time. In his white room it was never day or night.

It was simply white.

Occasionally, he would fall asleep and then find himself waking, disorientated and confused. For a few seconds he would be completely at a loss as to where he was. He could be in the dormitory at Brendon, in his room in the TARDIS, even back on Trion. And then reality would kick in and he would let out a wail of despair.

Sometimes they did things to him. Probed him, or extracted fluids from his body. Or stabbed him, like a pig on a stick. Sometimes he could feel the cold metal of a table beneath him and the tight constriction of metal straps on his arms and thighs and around his neck.

He could feel the table now. His naked skin was glued to the clammy, slick surface. His flesh reacted and he shivered. He felt ashamed. Of his cowardice in standing up to this torture. Of his body and how small and insignificant he was. Most of all, he was ashamed of letting himself get into this situation in the first place.

His vision had become impaired. Some time previously a mechanical arm had been lowered above his head and some kind of liquid had been dripped into his eyes which were clamped open by metal devices. The liquid had stung badly and Turlough had felt a burning sensation in his optic nerves. He had screamed and struggled against the straps. Then he had begged for mercy and, when he received no reply, had begun a tirade of abuse against his unseen captor.

Now the stinging in his eyes had subsided, though he still couldn't clearly make out what was going on around him. The metal clamps on his eyes retracted and Turlough felt sheer bliss at being able to close them for the first time in what seemed like days. He was aware that a vague shape was moving around him, but he really wasn't interested so long as he/she/they didn't hurt him any more.

He cried out in agony when a hot, snake-like anal probe entered him and a thin river of blood seeped down his leg. He screamed even louder when a syringe broke the skin on his neck and extracted more of his blood. But now, as he opened his eyes, he realised that he'd been merely saving the biggest scream of all for what was about to happen.

Above him, whirring at several thousands of revolutions a second, was a bright, diamond-sharp drill bit. And it was being lowered towards his face.

Part Two

King for a Day

'The Exiles shall, with righteous anger, spread internal strife, and make a great conspiracy against the King.'

An extremely bad translation of 'Century I.13' from *The True Prophecies or Prognostications of Michael Nostradamus* first translated by Theophilus de Garencieres (1672).

Chapter Nine

A Man Out of Time

Mr Joyce, the InterCom guide, had been perfectly charming thought the Doctor as he, Tegan and Milligan were shown into yet another of the seemingly never-ending underground laboratories in the research and development facility. Of course, that meant nothing. Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich had been delightful company when the Doctor had pursued the Master across Berlin during the night of the long knives. That didn't stop the Doctor from (occasionally) wishing that he had taken the gun that one of the SS men had offered him for his own protection, and shot the pair of them in the head with it.

But, in all honesty, that wouldn't have been his style.

And, anyway, time looks after itself. The Doctor, of all people, was acutely aware of *that*.

'The computer and its applications have allowed us to change the way in which we perceive the world. In the 1960s they envisioned a global village. One world containing a people united by one common language. They thought that the language would be television. But with the Internet such a dream is now an absolute reality.'

'A wonderfully Marxist attitude,' noted the Doctor as he toyed idly with a computer mouse. 'One that I hardly expected to see manifested in the heart of a multinational conglomerate.' He emphasised the last word as if searching for some indication that it had unnerved Joyce. There was no reaction, except for a continuation of the sales pitch.

'Marx? What a romantic fool *he* was. No, Dr Smith, I think you'll find that InterCom celebrates the anarchy of Marxism without subscribing to its methods. We regard capitalism as most people regard poetry. As a thing of beauty.' Joyce smiled. 'Once, the study of computers was the province of idealists. We merely see idealism as the first step of an achievable goal.'

'Turning rebellion into money?' asked Milligan sarcastically.

'Yes,' said the Doctor, brightly. 'How delightfully American.' He turned to Tegan, power-dressed in a severe two-piece royal blue business suit and wearing the sternest fake spectacles that Private Wooldridge could find in the UNIT costume stores. 'Anything to add Miss Jones?'

Tegan gave the Doctor an ice-cold stare that threatened to freeze him to the floor. ‘Mr Joyce, your company has a large monopoly in some areas of global telecommunications,’ she said at last, looking up from her copious notes. ‘You told us earlier that over half the communications satellites currently in orbit are owned or co-owned by InterCom.’

‘That’s approximately accurate,’ replied Joyce. There was a withering disdain in his voice for this annoying woman who seemed to have spent the last hour asking the most awkward questions imaginable.

‘Don’t you think that’s a potentially dangerous situation?’

And that was another one.

‘Not for InterCom,’ said Joyce with a cunning smile. ‘Or our shareholders for that matter. They approve totally. Would you prefer that we left the exploration of space to the Chinese?’

‘Typical middle management,’ the Doctor whispered to Milligan. ‘Always thinking about this year’s profits, never about next year’s losses.’ The Doctor put the mouse down and moved past Joyce towards the nervous figure waiting beside the laboratory door. ‘Dr Lewis I presume,’ said the Doctor, shaking hands. ‘We haven’t been introduced, but your reputation precedes you.’

‘You must be Dr Smith,’ said Lewis, with the faintest trace of the Welsh valleys in his accent. ‘I’m afraid to say I’m not familiar with *your* work.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor, ‘it’s a bit obscure. A predecessor of mine did meet you in the early Seventies at MIT. Tried to recruit you to UNIT, I understand.’

Lewis’s eyes narrowed. ‘How do you know about *that*?’ he asked, barely concealing his annoyance.

‘I wasn’t aware your failure to pass the selection board was a state secret,’ said the Doctor with deliberate emphasis on the ‘f’ word. ‘Lewis the physicist isn’t it, hmm?’ he continued, mocking Lewis’s dreadfully fake America-via-Cardiff accent. ‘So, you joined the brain drain and started working for the Yankee dollar. Well *that* was patriotic!’

‘The money being offered was –’

‘Half what you were getting on the Apollo programme, yes?’ interrupted the Doctor. ‘Still, I dare say you may get to Mars one day. We’ve been as far as Neptune, don’t you know?’

Lewis could seethe quietly no longer. ‘*We’re* going a lot further than that,’ he began angrily but was silenced by the intervention of Joyce.

‘I’m sure,’ said the InterCom man, ‘that there will be plenty of time for reminiscences later. Doctor, you expressed a specific interest in viewing our electronics department.’

‘Yes,’ noted the Doctor, then dropped into cod-Welsh again. ‘Perhaps old Lewis “to the power of infinity” here would like to show me around, isn’t it?’

‘That won’t be possible I’m afraid,’ Joyce answered with seemingly sincere regret, as Lewis’s face turned an angry beetrooted. ‘Richard has to get back to his own work, don’t you Richard?’

‘I can stay if . . .’

‘Don’t you Richard?’ repeated Joyce, with more than a hint of menace.

Lewis was humiliated and defeated. ‘Yes,’ he said, crushed by the weight of Joyce’s authority.

‘Oh what a pity,’ said the Doctor with a sigh of disappointment. ‘And I was so looking forward to asking Dick how he had managed to alleviate the problems of thargon differentials in the orange spectrum of upper atmospheric disturbance.’

Lewis looked baffled. ‘What are you talking about?’ he asked, his accent slipping to the floor and shattering into a million pieces.

‘A sense of humour? I like that,’ noted the Doctor. ‘But, in all seriousness, I’d be fascinated to know how you achieved it. No one on this planet has ever found a way to create a stable energy field of the kind you’re using on your latest satellites. It’s a science I didn’t think we’d see for another twenty or thirty years.’ He turned to Joyce. ‘On this planet anyway.’

‘Well Doctor,’ began Joyce, and for the first time the Doctor could see a real and obvious discomfort in the company man’s face. ‘What you have to realise is . . .’

‘Mr Joyce,’ said a breathless technician at the door, shattering the tension of the moment. Joyce, visibly relieved, excused himself and headed out of the room. The Doctor cast an ominous glance at Lewis who was also retreating backwards towards the door.

‘Not sneaking out are you, Dick?’ Lewis didn’t reply. ‘We know,’ the Doctor told him at last.

‘You might think you do,’ Lewis replied.

The Doctor chuckled. ‘Chung Sen’s a genius and even he couldn’t have been responsible for some of the advances this company is alleged to have made,’ he said simply. ‘You can leave now,’ he told Lewis. ‘And you can tell your twilight demimonde, whatever they’re called – “conglomerate” isn’t it? Tell them that UNIT knows exactly what they’re up to.’ He turned to Tegan and Milligan and grandly announced: ‘Everything you’ve seen here today from the smallest microchip on up, is the product of alien technology.’

Lewis scuttled from the room.

‘My God,’ said Milligan. ‘Aliens in the boardroom, whatever next?’

‘They’ve been doing it for years,’ said the Doctor, ‘though this is the worst case I’ve come across.’

‘So what are they up to?’ asked Tegan.

'Haven't got a clue yet,' admitted the Doctor, brightly. 'But we don't want them to know that.'

Seconds later Joyce returned with a grave look on his face. 'Doctor, I'm terribly sorry but we must cut short your visit. Whilst we've been talking a terrorist incident has taken place in another part of this complex. More than thirty members of the public are dead and many more are injured. As you can imagine, there is the possibility of more acts of sabotage ...'

'That's all right,' said the Doctor. 'I've seen all I need to.'

Tegan wasn't sure which she found more shocking. Joyce's revelation of the fatalities – though she rationalised that he was obviously desperate to see the back of the Doctor – or the Doctor himself and his casual reaction to such a human tragedy.

She began to say something but the Doctor shot her back a cold look that mirrored her earlier one.

'Later,' he said, between gritted teeth. 'We deal with that later.'

More details of the tragedy emerged while the Doctor and his party were making their way to the surface and by the time InterCom staff ushered them into their car and out of the complex, the figure of those dead had risen to forty-five.

'Does this have anything to do with UNIT?' Tegan asked angrily as the car sped away from the gates.

Milligan began to answer but the Doctor got there first. 'Of course it doesn't. What we've got here is a conundrum and we are merely one part of it. And so, as a matter of disinterest, are InterCom.'

'You said they were aliens,' said Milligan.

'Yes. I'm not sure what kind yet, though I do have some very nasty suspicions.'

'And meanwhile people are getting killed,' said Tegan.

'You're right of course,' said the Doctor, deep in thought. 'One of the guards mentioned that MacArthur Park was being used as a temporary hospital. That's nearby, yes?'

'Five minutes' drive,' answered Milligan.

'Good,' said the Doctor. 'Then perhaps we can be of some help there.'

The park was a mess. Everywhere you looked there were bloodied bodies lying on stretchers surrounded by paramedic teams. And, strangely, there was an eerie silence as though the city itself had come to a stop in sympathy. A police officer had barred the Doctor's way as he attempted to enter the park, but a combination of Milligan's UNIT pass and the Doctor's claims to some medical knowledge had seen them through the cordons and barricades.

The Doctor found the main emergency medical tent, which had been set up as a temporary surgery. He removed his coat and dumped it into the arms of a passing nurse as he strode confidently towards the first terribly wounded victim. A small woman wearing a green surgical mask barred his way.

'Who the hell are you?' she asked with an accent the Doctor recognised.

'Hello again,' he said with a quick smile.

'Oh, Dr Smith!' said the woman, removing her mask. It was Julia Franklin from the hotel. 'What a mess we've got here!'

'Are you all right?' asked the Doctor.

Julia smiled and waved away a concerned-looking orderly. 'He's another medic,' she announced. 'Yes, I'm fine. We'd just arrived at the InterCom site when the bomb went off. I thought I might be some help here. Robert's driving one of the ambulances. Bit of a busman's holiday for both of us, it seems. They'll never believe this at Beardsley's.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Our village pub in Redborough.' Julia turned back towards the critically wounded victim. 'Give this man 20 ccs of morphine and ship him out,' she barked to anyone that was listening. 'Let's have the next one!' She turned back to the Doctor. 'It's been a madhouse in here but we're doing what we can to stabilise the wounded. I'm so glad you're here.'

'I'm a bit out of practice,' the Doctor noted with genuine regret. 'But I'll do what I can.'

'We could do with some light so that I can see what I'm doing,' Julia confessed.

The Doctor took out his penlight torch and shone it on to his hand with an apologetic shrug of the shoulders.

'Well, it's a start!'

Tegan and Milligan did what they could. Carrying supplies and helping to direct people who were simply suffering from cuts and bruises, or were stunned by the horror of what they had seen, to where they would be cared for. After half an hour the Doctor came to join them as they sat, exhausted, in the centre of the park.

'I'm out of my league,' said the Doctor sadly.

'I think we all are,' replied Tegan.

'Medically I mean,' continued the Doctor. 'Most of the critically wounded have been taken off to hospital now. And many of them will live thanks to Dr Franklin. And no thanks to me.'

'It's going to take some time for these people to put their lives back together,' noted Milligan as he looked around at the hundreds of people sitting wrapped in blankets with dazed, numb expressions on their faces. Then he stood up,

suddenly. 'I don't believe it,' he said, running off towards a group of the injured.

'Shell shock?' asked Tegan.

'I don't think so,' answered the Doctor as Milligan returned with two men. One had an ugly gash on the top of his arm, though his companion appeared to be unhurt.

'Doctor, Tegan, I'd like you to meet Lieutenant Mark Barrington and Captain Geoff Paynter.'

The Doctor stood and shook both men's hands. 'UNIT?' he asked.

'I knew you when you had curly hair and a big scarf, Doc,' said Paynter happily as he looked the Doctor up and down, taking in his strange clothes. 'Did you get lost on the way to the third test match, or something?'

'It's symbolic if somewhat unmysterious,' said the Doctor simply. 'A lot of people don't seem to like it. Are you two all right?'

Paynter pointed to his partner. 'Mark caught a bit of heavy metal in the shoulder and both of us have got Westminster cathedral's bells ringing in our ears, but it could have been a lot worse.'

'Indeed,' replied the Doctor, looking at the carnage around him. 'I take it you're the Brigadier's men on the inside.'

'Right,' said Barrington. 'Not that we got very far inside but we did find something ...' He paused and looked across at Paynter. 'Shouldn't we be doing this somewhere more private than here?'

'Stuff that,' said Paynter. 'There's a sodding great spaceship in InterCom, Doctor. Big as a house! We've got to tell the Brigadier. We need a special operations squad in here, we've got to close them down.'

'Calm down, Captain,' said the Doctor quickly. 'I know there's an extraterrestrial dimension. What we need to know now, is who they are and what they want.'

The UNIT Hercules transport plane was crossing the Rockies when Lethbridge-Stewart received the incoming videolink message from the Doctor and Tyrone. The device made him nervous as did much of the cannibalised International Electromatics technology that UNIT had put to such excellent use. Rather as his grandmother had once considered the telephone to be 'the devil's work'. He had just been settling down to read *The Times* and a promising article on the decision to begin the construction of the international space station in 2001. He had much catching up to do after three days at that dreary conference and this seemed the ideal opportunity. But the obituaries depressed him as he read about men younger than himself dying of heart disease and in car crashes. And when he started reading the bug-eyed ranting of some

whippersnapper politician named Hatch, he was for once actually delighted to be interrupted by UNIT business.

‘Spot of bother, Doctor?’ he asked as the videoscreen spluttered into life.

‘A trifle more than that, Brigadier. You didn’t mention the terrorists.’

Lethbridge-Stewart was surprised. ‘Those Sons of Nova-Scotia people? I didn’t think you’d want to be sidetracked by trivialities such as those.’

‘Tell that to the . . . what is it, seventy-odd families who’ve just lost someone because of trivialities,’ said the Doctor angrily.

‘The Doctor’s right,’ confirmed Tyrone, sitting at the Time Lord’s side. ‘This should be as much our concern as InterCom.’

‘Agreed,’ noted Lethbridge-Stewart, which seemed to greatly surprise the Doctor. ‘And speaking of InterCom . . .’

‘I saw what they wanted me to see, although I was convinced of alien involvement during my visit.’

‘And now . . .?’

The Doctor gave Lethbridge-Stewart what he was looking for. ‘After what your bright young boys saw in the complex. I’d say “convinced” has become “certain”. The question is, how many players are there in this game?’

‘I don’t follow you,’ said the Brigadier.

‘Do you remember what I told you about the CIA?’ asked the Doctor.

And, indeed, the Brigadier did. He remembered a conversation on a summer Sunday afternoon on a south London river bank almost thirty years earlier, with a bright sky, the laughter of children and an exiled Time Lord wearing a velvet smoking jacket. Ridiculously, what the Brigadier could remember most about the conversation was that while he and the Doctor were talking they were watching a child learning to ride a push-bike. It seemed a lifetime ago. For the Doctor, it was two lifetimes ago.

‘You suspected that aliens had infiltrated the CIA thirty years ago,’ he said. ‘It’s always been in the back of my mind.’

‘Oh Brigadier,’ began the Doctor. ‘If only it were so simple. The situation is much more complicated than that.’

It had been one of those days for Chung Sen. And it was about to get worse.

‘A progress report would be helpful,’ said Sanger via the videolink. Chung winced. His silence told Sanger everything he needed to know.

‘You should know,’ Sanger continued, ‘that I’ve changed my mind about the girl.’

‘Oh really? In what way?’

‘I want her found along with the disk.’

Chung Sen was puzzled. ‘Why is she suddenly so important?’

Sanger seemed amused by the question. ‘That’s none of your concern,’ he said with a calculating sneer. ‘The fact is that you will find her. Or heads will roll. Specifically, *your* head.’ The videolink was disconnected with such suddenness that for many seconds Chung sat and blinked at the little white dot on the screen in front of him. A thought ran through his mind – something Nietzsche had once said about sleeping with dragons.

He sighed, deeply, and turned on the videolink again. Almost instantly he found himself looking at the face of the Japanese InterCom head of security, Shajo, who raised a quizzical eyebrow at Chung’s worried expression.

‘A progress report would be helpful,’ said Chung Sen.

The man’s silence told Chung everything he needed to know.

In the basement of the UNIT headquarters was a shooting range.

Paynter and Barrington excitedly took their Browning 9mm pistols into this Aladdin’s cave like a pair of kids let loose in a sweet shop. As soon as the elevator doors opened, they found themselves flat on the ground in a mock-up of a typical small American town whilst, around them, semi-automatic gunfire exploded.

‘Target left,’ shouted Paynter, rolling over in the dirt as Barrington shot the head off a target dummy. ‘Cover me!’

‘What’s the objective?’ asked Barrington firing blindly.

‘Shoot lots of targets and don’t get shot yourself. A bit like life really,’ noted Paynter as another target turned – this time a green-skinned Julsaen. Paynter got himself into a classic two-handed firing position and took out the alien with three rapid bullets to the head.

‘What do you make of the Doctor?’ asked Barrington. His target was a mother and child and he shouldered arms. A bullet whizzed past his ear and he turned to see Paynter firing. Looking back, he saw the paper faces of the pair falling away to reveal shape-changing Zygons.

‘UNIT motto mate,’ said Paynter. ‘If it moves, shoot it. If it doesn’t move, shoot it just in case it tries to.’ He turned back to his own side of the street and pumped three shots into a coffee shop full of teenagers. ‘There’s a Cyberman by the bar. I feel terrible about the casualties of war but like, you know, what can you do?’

‘Selected targets are better,’ said Barrington, moving to a crouched position and firing at another alien figure behind the Coke machine. ‘So, the Doctor ...?’

‘He’s about the fourth one I’ve met,’ noted Paynter, reloading. ‘There’s supposed to be nine or ten of them, apparently. I like this one, he seems like a nice guy.’

‘He strikes me as being a bit wet,’ said Barrington flatly.

Paynter was surprised. 'Looks can be deceptive,' he said as he drew level with his partner.

Barrington fired again. 'All that science-fiction nonsense befuddles me.'

'I know what you mean,' said Paynter as they reached the safety of a hidden alcove. 'But you get used to it. The Doctor used to be a big geezer with teeth and curls. Later, he changed into someone else. The Brigadier tried to explain it to me but I got a headache. He was using the metaphor of a caterpillar changing into a butterfly, only the Doctor does it again and again.'

'Doesn't seem natural.'

'It isn't. He's an alien. Deal with it. Cloning's not natural either but we're using the technology to our advantage.'

'I have problems with that as well,' Barrington said, filling his magazine with more bullets. Inches from his foot, a puff of dust indicated that someone was shooting at them. 'Looks like the natives are getting restless,' he said.

'Hang back,' said Paynter, holding on to his colleague's arm. 'Let them wait.'

'Sometimes, I think we should be more open and accountable. To the public, I mean.'

Paynter began to laugh. 'Mark, mate. Aliens have landed on Earth at a rate of one mothership with supporting killing machines every couple of months for the last thirty-odd years. *Everybody* knows. Half of them have been televised live! It's just people don't talk about it ...'

'I know that. I mean the use of alien technology.'

'We've got to fight them somehow. What's the alternative ... Throw rocks at them?'

Barrington clearly favoured the diplomatic approach. 'We could try actually talking to them,' he said.

'You try that with a Dalek mate, it'd have your balls off in a jiffy!' Paynter roared with laughter. 'Let's get out there and shoot something, I'm getting bored!'

At that moment two pinpricks of red light appeared, targeting themselves on Paynter's and Barrington's heads. 'Move,' cried Barrington, but it was too late.

+++ YOU HAVE BEEN DESTROYED BY A JULSAEN ENERGY CANNON.
PLEASE PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND RETURN TO THE SAFE ZONE
+++

Paynter unleashed a string of expletives. 'Should have seen that coming,' he chided as he and Barrington trooped dejectedly back up the street towards the elevator.

'Ah well, it's not as if we *really* got killed or anything,' noted Barrington. 'I mean, that *would* have been a hit of a blow!'

'Score?' shouted Paynter to the unseen computer.

+++ YOU ACHIEVED A COMBINED KILL-RATIO OF ... 83.7 PER CENT
+++

'Eight out of ten,' said Paynter, unloading his weapon and watching the spent bullets fall to the floor. 'Eight out of ten is good. Eight out of ten will keep you alive. For a while.'

'I'm thinking about going to the Hollywood Bowl tonight,' said Barrington as they entered the elevator. 'It's the Beatles millennium tour. Fancy coming?'

'I think I'll pass,' said Paynter. 'I've got blisters on my feet and a bit of a headache and I want to finish the report to the Brigadier on InterCom. Anyway, they've never been the same since poor old Ringo drowned.'

Hiroshima. Lot of irony in that, thought Kyla. Because what she held in her hand had the potential to atomise the world.

The safe house was spartan at best. No furniture except for a futon bed. That didn't matter, because Kyla didn't have any time for home comforts. She had needed every second of the two days that she had been in hiding to decode the final elements of Chung Sen's secret files. And now she had done it.

She had taken far more risks than she would have wished. But that was part of the deal. She got her allies what they wanted, they gave her what she wanted: the annihilation of her enemies. Kyla knelt on the bed and saved the file on her laptop computer on to a writable CD-ROM. Once this had been completed she removed a wire from the back of the computer and put it into the bare telephone socket beside the door.

This was the really dangerous part.

She accessed the Internet and dialled up a twenty-nine-digit site address. Seconds turned into minutes as Kyla drummed her fingers on the keyboard in irritation.

'Come on, you faggot. Connect. Do you want this stuff or not?'

The computer beeped at her.

Buffer saved @ Thurs 8th Jul 22:15:43 [PST]

```
<@Lighthouse>    Good evening.  
<@Orthogenesis>  I have the 'champagne'.  
<@Lighthouse>    Decoded?  
<@Orthogenesis>  Fully. Prepare to upload.
```

Kyla inserted the disk into its drive and pressed 'enter'.

The screen was flooded with scrolling images, billions of bytes of memory whizzing through the telecommunication system towards their destination.

Connection Interrupted

The warning message appeared so suddenly that Kyla stared at it blankly for several seconds. ‘What . . .?’ she began. Then the implications became clear. She cursed as she snatched the lead from the back of the computer.

Plan B.

Go to Plan B. Go directly to Plan B. Do not pass judgement . . .

She cursed again. Then, calming herself, she took the disk from the computer and ran towards the door, aware that she had mere minutes before InterCom’s trigger-happy goons would arrive.

Even with singed hair and a black tarmac-burn on his face, Jon Newton still looked impressive to his coven. Today, more so than ever. They were the lead item on all the network news programmes, they had hundreds of congratulatory e-mails from their brothers in Japan, Germany, Britain and Russia. And, most importantly, Newton was in such a good mood that he wasn’t hitting anyone. Even the surroundings were more palatial than normal. The front room of Bill Quay’s Studio City apartment wasn’t as big as many of the church crypts in which they had met before, but it was certainly cleaner.

‘De feu celeste au Royal edifice, Quand la lumiere du Mars defaillira, Sept mois grand Guerre, mort gent de malefice,’ chanted Newton excitedly. He lit another black candle and motioned the group to kneel as he continued with his outpouring of hatred. ‘Celestial fire shall fall from the skies on the house of the King. When Mars is eclipsed by the moon, the Great War of witchcraft and death shall reign in the seventh month.’

‘This shall be the whole of the law,’ intoned the coven.

‘The ruination shall beat down upon the heads and the backs of tyrants and evil men. *L’an mil neuf cens nonante neuf sept mois, du ciel viendra un grand Roy d’effrayeur.*’

‘This shall be the whole of the law.’

‘July 1999,’ said Hayley, loved-up on pills and a thirst for blood.

‘The great King of Terror is coming down from the skies. Yes,’ shouted Newton. ‘Yes. He’s gonna be down amongst ’em.’

The expectant look on the faces of the coven, like children waiting for Christmas morning, scared him momentarily. He had brought them to the top of the mountain but now they wanted to go that extra step and actually see the promised land. ‘Soon,’ Newton said softly, reflecting that even he was starting to believe his own propaganda. ‘Our deliverance is at hand. You’ve finally got what you wanted!’

Nigel had grasped one of the black candles, close to the burning flame. The hot wax dripped on to his palm but he felt no pain. Only joy.

‘It is written,’ cried Newton, throwing his arms up high. ‘Deliverance from our oppressors. The churches of God shall be persecuted and the holy temples

shall be defiled. The crippled shall be suffocated in the city of the great King. The plan . . . ' Newton paused.

'Tell us the plan,' shouted Hayley.

'Next part of the plan. We attack those who would destroy us with their military ways. It is written that a barbarous soldier shall attack the King.' Newton grabbed a burning candle and effortlessly snapped it in two. 'UNIT,' he spat, 'shall pay for their infidel heresy with their blood.'

Chapter Ten

Bring on the Dancing Horses

For some reason Turlough felt as though he had been moved whilst he slept, but a small patch of his dried blood on the padded floor confirmed that he was still in his white room.

The knowledge was strangely comforting.

In another corner was the place where he had soiled himself days ago. (Or was it days, since time had no meaning?)

Turlough sucked air through the pinprick hole in his tooth. The room was warm and he felt safe. Yet he knew, in the back of his mind, that at some stage the horrors would begin again. The noise. The prodding and poking. The penetrations.

He waited for them to resume for what seemed like hours. But time continued to be meaningless. Finally he decided that he'd had enough. Whatever they wanted, he would give them. Whatever information, about whoever . . . it didn't matter. Everyone had a breaking point and Turlough had long since reached his.

His arms felt as though all the blood had been drained from them and then pumped back. He looked down to find his skin white and anaemic. Bullet-like needle marks covered his arms, his thighs, his buttocks; any surface that could be pierced had been.

He stood up and began to walk around his cell as though in some half-remembered dream-state. He felt dizzy and sick. He was trying to force his mind to focus on one thing, just one, that wasn't the pain and the terror he felt. Anything. He started to count his steps. Eight from one wall to the other. Then ten in another direction. He began to create geometrical shapes with his steps.

Triangles and rhombuses.

Oblongs, hexagons and parallelograms.

He was back in Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart's trigonometry class, cleverer (by an irregular fraction) than anybody else in the room. Including Lethbridge-Stewart, for all his knowledge of alien worlds.

Brendon was the key. Keep thinking of Brendon he told himself.

Think about poor little Ibbotson and Bolam the school bully. Matthewson, McMullen, Pradie, Rogerson, Shaw major, Shaw minor, Turlough, Watt. The register. Or was it the back row of the rugby fifteen? No, it must have been the register because Turlough never played rugby.

He remembered that. And he remembered how he'd tried to run away, many many times. And how they always caught him and brought him back and beat him, again and again, with shoes and straps and canes. But they never broke him.

Never.

They weren't even close. Because he was *different*. He was better than all of them. Turlough could remember looking in the mirror and seeing distorted, Dadaesque images of himself. The school genius. And it didn't matter how much they threatened him or bullied him or pushed his head down the lavatory, nothing changed that fact. And they knew it. That was why they did all of those horrible things to him.

Because they were afraid of him.

'You're afraid of me,' Turlough screamed. 'That's why you're doing all of this. You can make me perform for you like a pantomime horse. Be your slave. You can do what you like, but you'll never break me. Never.'

Then the sonic attack started again and Turlough crumpled to the floor, crying.

'Sleep well?' asked David Milligan as Tegan looked up from her bowl of cereal in the canteen.

'Not really,' she replied truthfully. 'I never liked hotels much. So the Doctor said we might as well come in early and see if we could find out any more about InterCom's background. I've spent two hours in front of that damn computer again and my brain hurts.'

'Find anything?'

'No,' Tegan noted sadly. 'Nothing we didn't know already. They started in the early Eighties making computer software and financing some independent films. Went global with the spread of the Internet. Sanger, Joyce and Giresse have been there since the beginning. Lots of dark hints, but nothing solid.'

'And clean?'

'As a shower unit.'

Milligan nodded. 'And you're worried about your friend, aren't you?'

'Is it that obvious? I mean, I don't even like Turlough much, you know. But he's like a dog, you get used to having him around.'

'We've got every policeman in America on the lookout for him, you know. We'll find him, if . . .'

Tegan was horrified. 'If he's still alive?' she asked, angrily.

‘I was actually going to say if he’s still on the planet,’ said Milligan, giving her a sympathetic smile.

‘You got back late last night,’ noted Paynter. Barrington had finally surfaced and was brushing his teeth with a look on his face that suggested that his mouth tasted as though something had died in it.

‘This city never sleeps,’ said the lieutenant through a mouthful of toothpaste. He spat it out into the basin and rinsed his mouth with water. ‘Interesting place. It’s like England with buttons . . .’

‘Was the gig any good?’

Barrington thought for a moment, as if trying to pull distant memories from a dusty box-file in the darkest recesses of his mind. ‘Not bad. It’s a pity there was only George, Billy and Klaus left from the classic line-up. I met some people from Leeds and we went to a place called the Cheesecake Factory in Marina del Ray. Which was bloody expensive.’

‘Good menu?’ asked a fascinated Paynter.

‘Not bad. Oasis soup . . .’

‘You get a roll with it?’

‘Precisely. Then we went to a nightclub somewhere in Hollywood. I kind of lost track of the time,’ admitted Barrington.

‘Funny place Leeds,’ noted Paynter. ‘Full of thieves and recidivists. So, did you score then?’

‘None of your business,’ replied Barrington.

‘That means “no”, I take it?’

Barrington refused to take the offered bait. ‘Anyway the club was horrible. Lots of Tracys and Shirleys dancing to handbag music. Or the LA equivalent.’

‘You’re a long way from Britpop Central, Mark,’ said Paynter, opening the window blinds and allowing the brilliant morning sunlight to flood into the room.

‘Tell me about it. I passed cardboard city near the airport on the drive back. You’d think in a place like this they’d be able to solve homelessness, wouldn’t you?’

Paynter sought for a way to avoid answering the question. Finally he said, ‘People who have all the answers should never be trusted. Want some breakfast?’

‘Nah,’ replied Barrington. ‘Touch of Montezuma’s revenge this morning. Shouldn’t have had that thing with prawns on it.’

‘Get your trousers on,’ said Paynter. ‘The Brig’s due in from New York this morning. I expect he’ll want to see us.’

* * *

If only our mail could talk, what a story it would have to tell. The passage of a small, innocuous package through time zones and national borders would become an epic tale. A novel. A trilogy. A whole multivolume saga.

If only our mail could see, what sights it would have access to as it heads, inevitably, towards a final destination.

Neither of these thoughts passed through the mind of Kyla O'Shaugnessy as she waited in a deserted bus terminal in rural Japan for her contact to arrive. Neither had they been foremost in the mind of her contact, a small overweight Englishman in his mid-forties with thinning, sandy-coloured hair. His name was Burdon, and he was massively overdressed for the occasion, looking like someone who had stepped into a colonial time warp in 1962 and had only just emerged to find the empire gone along with rationing, the maximum wage and traditional jazz. He took the package containing the CD-ROM from Kyla with a monosyllabic lack of interest concerning its contents.

An hour later Burdon was on board a flight to Darwin, the package masking-taped to the inside lining of his tweed jacket. And there it stayed whilst its courier read a Bernard Cornwell novel and a terminally boring fly-fishing magazine, watched the in-flight movie and took the vegetarian option at dinner. When he landed in Australia he headed for a motel on the outskirts of an anonymous Northern Territories border town and waited for several tedious hours before the telephone rang and he was given the location of his drop-off point.

On a country road seemingly a million miles from civilisation Burdon stood at a deserted crossroads and waited patiently for yet more hours until a jeep appeared in the distance in a cloud of dust. As the vehicle approached Burdon's hand, inside his jacket pocket, tightened on his gun.

'G'day,' said a cheerful Antipodean voice. 'I believe you have a special delivery for Mr Goodfellow?'

'Is Mr Goodfellow well?' asked Burdon, his prearranged lines rehearsed many times.

'He is, but Missus Goodfellow has been ill for some days. This delivery may help.'

Satisfied, Burdon ripped open the lining of his jacket and removed the package which was wrapped in clear plastic.

'Please tell Mr Goodfellow that I hope his wife recovers soon,' he said as he handed it across.

'Don't ad-lib mate,' said the man in the jeep, baring a gap-toothed smile and taking the disk from Burdon. 'It's only supposed to be a walk-on part.'

Without another word, he swung the jeep through 180 degrees and drove off in the direction of Queensland.

Burdon remained for a few moments, watching until the jeep became a mere speck on the distant horizon, then turned and started the five-mile walk back to town.

So the chain of passage continued. Hand to hand. Pocket to pocket. Vehicle to vehicle. Down a myriad country roads and dirt tracks on a motorbike, through bushland and desert against the staggering backdrop of a bloodshot, starless sky and a burnt-orange rising sun half obscured by thin wispy clouds. Through a small-town railway depot near Cairns in the early hours of a dusty, sweltering north Queensland morning with a heat haze that turned the horizon into a shimmering series of broken wavy lines. Along the tracks to a port on the Pacific Ocean Gold Coast where the fat, bearded owner of a battered old fishing vessel, wearing a dirty string vest and a perpetual scowl, took the disk from the previous carrier and tossed it, casually, into the boat's filthy cabin.

Fifty miles off the coast of New Zealand a seaplane circled above the boat and then gently swooped down, settling on the calm sea almost without causing a ripple or a wave. The pilot was a strikingly beautiful young woman with the sort of Technicolor blonde hair that is rarely seen outside Grace Kelly movies of the 1950s. She was wearing a rubber diving suit and appeared at the entrance to the cockpit, then dived into the sea and swam the short distance to the fishing boat.

'Missus Goodfellow's condition is deteriorating,' she said, spitting out the saltwater that lapped into her mouth. 'The antidote is required. Urgently.'

'You'd better give her this,' said the boat man, throwing the package into the girl's hands. She caught it and held it tightly, giving him a glare of contempt. 'Relax,' he said. 'It's waterproof.'

'I know,' she replied dismissively, turning back towards the plane. 'And if anybody asks, you haven't seen me, right?'

'Pardon?' he asked.

The girl reached the plane and spent a moment clambering awkwardly into the cockpit. She shook her wet hair and placed the package in the safety of a dashboard compartment. 'All I'm saying,' she shouted, turning with a flare gun in her hand, 'is don't breathe a word of this. To anyone.'

'No,' screamed the man as the girl raised the gun and prepared to fire. The cargo's highly flammable, that thing could . . .'

The gun fired and the flare streaked out across the short expanse of water, landing in the stern of the boat with a burst of bright light. Seconds later the deck was ablaze. Mere seconds after that, the boat exploded.

'Blow it up?' the girl asked. But there was no one on the burning ocean to reply.

* * *

Ten hours later the girl, out of her rubbers and wearing in their place a flowing gypsy skirt and a loose summer blouse, walked into the Transamerica Pyramid building in San Francisco and headed for an office on the twenty-ninth floor.

'So, let's see what our friendly neighbourhood post person has brought us today,' Control said to Greaves after the girl had put the package in his hands without a word and left. He removed the disk from its weather-beaten casing and put it into the CD drive.

'This had better work,' he noted, with a little half-smile that told Greaves he was convinced that it wouldn't.

'Is it really that important?' asked Greaves, but Control didn't immediately answer. Instead he was looking at a screen full of scrolling three-dimensional DNA imagery.

'I'd have definitely said so,' he said finally as the information continued to flash across the screen at a frightening rate. 'So that's what those naughty aliens are up to,' he said as the screen threw out its gigabytes of facts and figures. 'They must be frankly ticked-off that they've lost this.'

Greaves didn't see what that had to do with anything. 'Not our concern, surely?' he asked.

'Not really, no. But an angry enemy is a dangerous enemy. Well-fed armies seldom win wars against starving men.'

'Actually ...' Greaves began. If his intention was to contradict his superior, he thought better of it.

'Now, the question is what do we do with this information,' Control mused.

'Do with it?'

Typically, Control answered the question with an enigmatic statement. 'Sometimes games have more dimensions to them than even the players themselves realise,' he noted. 'This is a seminal example.'

'How so?'

'What we have here,' Control said, removing the disk from the computer and filing it in his drawer, 'is a turf war between parties in which there are three potential outcomes.'

'Which is best for us?'

Control seemed almost amused as he pondered the answer. 'None of them are wholly acceptable unfortunately,' he reflected. 'However, two are less unacceptable than the other, which is total annihilation of the human race – and the planet Earth into the bargain.'

'So, what do we do?'

'We wait,' said Control. 'Until any one of the parties figures it all out. Then we deal with the consequences.'

Chapter Eleven

The Girl Looked at Johnny

The Doctor had asked Milligan to show Tegan a little of Los Angeles and help to take her mind off the Turlough situation, an act of thoughtfulness that Mel Tyrone found particularly impressive.

‘You really care about them, don’t you?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Your companions.’

‘But of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re my friends, I’m duty-bound to look after them. It’s my *raison d’être* you might say.’

The answer, however, didn’t quite satisfy Tyrone. ‘But it goes beyond that,’ noted the UNIT man. ‘It’s almost parental. I realise that you must see humanity in the way that we would regard insects, but . . .’

The Doctor continued to be evasive. ‘I think you’re reading a little too much into the information in the files,’ he replied drily. ‘Why do you think I keep coming back to this planet? It’s not for the weather, that’s for certain!’

‘Point taken,’ said Tyrone, but he still looked unsure. ‘It seems to me that part of your “mission”, if that’s what you want to call it, is to educate and inform.’

The Doctor had, truthfully, never thought of it in quite that way before. But he agreed, on reflection, that it was. ‘Yes. It’s very Lord Reithian, I know. I suppose that makes me rather old-fashioned?’

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ said the Brigadier striding into Tyrone’s office. ‘Melvyn, could you get that dizzy girl of yours to provide me with a cup of tea, if that’s not too much for her?’

‘Certainly,’ said Tyrone, leaving with a pained expression on his face.

‘That’s being a little unkind to Natalie,’ noted the Doctor.

‘Nonsense. The girl’s a flibbertigibbet. She’s get a nosebleed if she tried to walk in a straight line,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart frostily.

‘We both thought the same about Jo Grant once upon a time,’ replied the Doctor.

For a second there was a sad look in the Brigadier’s eyes. ‘Poor Miss Grant,’ he said at last.

‘Why?’ asked the Doctor.

The Brigadier shook his head. 'You know the rules, Doctor. The future is an open book. As someone not a million miles away from here told me not so very long ago.'

The Doctor thought about pursuing the matter and then accepted that the tides of time wash everyone clean. Including himself. Perhaps especially him. 'Do you ever see any of them?' he asked.

'Yes. Frequently,' said the Brigadier seeming to come to the conclusion that this tiny fragment of information would not cause the time lines to disintegrate. 'One day you'll find out about that as well. That's a little chapter of your life all on its own. It's the knowledge that keeps us all together. After all, who else can you talk to about having walked on alien worlds?' Lethbridge-Stewart paused and smiled. 'They're good people, Doctor. The Chestertons, Miss Shaw, the Suttons. But then, you know that. You wouldn't have travelled with them if they weren't.'

'It sometimes seemed as if I didn't have much choice in the matter,' said the Doctor as Natalie Wooldridge entered carrying two teacups.

'Thank you,' scowled Lethbridge-Stewart as she put them on the table in front of them.

'That's all right Uncle Ally,' said Natalie. Then she popped a hand to her mouth as if to stop anything more incriminating emerging. 'Sorry,' she muttered and scurried off.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'I know I really shouldn't ask . . .' he said.

'For heaven's sake,' bristled the Brigadier angrily. 'I've known the girl since she was six. And she was featherbrained even then! I mean, look at this, she hasn't even put any sugar in my tea . . .'

'I'm sure she's doing her best.'

'Her best?' the Brigadier roared. 'Doctor, my grandmother could do better and she's been dead since 1955,' he continued, using one of his favourite aphorisms.

'Not interrupting anything, are we?' asked Captain Paynter as he, Barrington and Tyrone returned to the office.

'Not at all,' noted the Doctor. 'Pull up a seat. We have much to talk about.'

'How was the conference, sir?' asked Barrington.

Lethbridge-Stewart looked horrified at being reminded of it. 'Dreary, Lieutenant,' he said. 'All the Third World representatives were a bunch of cutthroats and ruffians who I wouldn't trust with a peashooter, let alone extremely dangerous alien technology. I've never trusted the Soviets. And now there are dozens of them . . .'

'Interesting,' said the Doctor. 'For you, the break-up of the old Soviet Union was a really bad thing wasn't it?'

'Well exactly,' agreed the Brigadier before he realised he was being ruthlessly sent up and returned his attention to Barrington's question. 'Sir Thomas tries hard to keep them all under control but it's a losing battle. Bunch of foreigners after all. Anyway, it seems we have more urgent matters to attend to. Perhaps we can have Captain Paynter's report first?'

'Yes sir,' said Paynter. He paused and looked genuinely uncertain about how much of a ten-page report to read. After a moment he pushed it across the desk towards the Brigadier and said, simply, 'InterCom have access to alien technology.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded. 'Brief, but useful. Doctor?'

'Intercom have access to alien technology,' repeated the Doctor, without any apparent irony. 'At least we know that much.'

'And nothing more?'

The Doctor began to say something, then stopped, shaking his head. 'Some suspicions,' he continued after a moment of soul-searching. 'Lots of speculation, rumour and hearsay. Which are all useless without some facts. I should prefer to confine myself to those before sending you all off on a wild goose chase. Suffice to say that I think what we're dealing with here is infiltration rather than conquest. I believe Intercom *are* aliens, rather than that they've been taken over by them.'

'What's their objective?' asked Tyrone.

Now that, thought the Doctor, was a question worth asking. 'Your guess is as good as mine,' he noted. 'Though having a direct point of access to virtually every man, woman and child on this planet through their computers, television screens and newspapers does raise some quite startling possibilities as I'm sure you'll agree.'

Paynter almost choked on his tea at that point.

'Indoctrination,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'An invasion from within ... We've seen all this before.'

'My God,' spluttered Paynter. 'How did we let this happen *again*?'

'The question is rather, what do we do about it?' said the Doctor.

'I think you'll find this one most interesting,' said Ryman as he and Sanger took the elevator to Eva's apartment. At the door they met Professor Lewis who was cleaning his spectacles on the hem of his white lab coat. 'Progress?' asked Ryman.

'Fascinating developments,' noted Lewis, leading the pair through Eva's bedroom to an observation room beyond. There Eva stood watching Turlough. Curled into a ball in the centre of the white room, he was once again being subjected to sensory experiments.

'The light in the room is gradually fading,' Eva noted, without taking her eyes from Turlough. 'Once the creature has adjusted to those conditions, we shall throw it back into harsh light and see how its eyes react to that.'

'And what will that prove?' asked Sanger.

'Ability to see in the dark might be useful,' said Eva.

Sanger seemed satisfied with this answer. 'Yes, I'll give you that,' he agreed. 'So, Professor,' he turned to Lewis. 'A definitive answer then?'

'I'm fairly certain that this man, this thing, is not human. At least, not wholly. A hybrid perhaps.'

'You're *fairly certain*?' asked Sanger.

Suddenly Lewis didn't seem anywhere near as sure as he had been a moment before. 'Fairly,' he repeated to a disgusted look from Ryman. 'It is certainly able to withstand temperatures considerably higher than the average human which is, after all, what the conglomerate is ultimately looking for. The signs all point to extraterrestrial origins. A higher white-blood-cell count, odd elements in the blood such as minute traces of uranium, not to mention its DNA profile which is peculiar to say the least.' As Lewis continued to gibber excitedly Ryman moved behind him, drew out a revolver and shot the scientist in the head, mid-sentence.

There was a momentary look of total bewilderment on Lewis's face just before he collapsed to the floor, dead. *What was all that about?* it seemed to ask.

'“Yes” would have done,' Ryman told the corpse as Chebb and another, smaller, InterCom operative entered the observation room carrying a black body bag. 'Make sure this is disposed of,' he said.

'Right,' agreed Chebb. 'The usual sanitisation procedure?'

'That would seem like a good idea,' noted Sanger.

Eva turned at last and looked at the body being placed in the bag. 'Was that really necessary?' she asked.

'His behaviour with the visitor from UNIT endangered the entire project,' said Sanger in an emotionless voice. 'He'd become a liability and we can't afford liabilities at this stage of the project. And anyway, he's just achieved his life's work – where else was there for the man to go from here?'

'*May* have achieved his life's work,' said Eva, strongly. 'We're still not certain that this ...' She pointed to Turlough, '... whatever it is, *is* an EBE.'

'Then you'd better *be* sure,' Sanger noted, 'or you'll be joining Lewis in the failures' retirement home.'

The sign in the window of Tower Records on Sherman Way next to the wonderfully named Moby Disc made David Milligan stop the car and shout in surprise.

‘Whoa! Look at that!’

Tegan looked. A ragged piece of white card had been blue-tacked, amateurishly, to the glass. Whoever had put it there obviously didn’t have any qualifications in visual display merchandising. The writing was spidery and smudged, in red felt-tip.

JOHNNY CHESTER
will be here signing copies of his first novel –
‘Neurotic Boy Outsider’
11 July

‘So?’ asked Tegan, after a moment of trying to decipher whether the second word of the third line was supposed to read ‘novel’ or ‘navel’.

‘Johnny Chester,’ repeated Milligan as if that explained everything.

‘Oh. Right. So?’

‘Johnny *bloody* Chester,’ said Milligan, his voice raising an excited notch.

‘Still requiring a “so“, here . . .’

Milligan had the look of whomsoever it was that had been assigned the tough job of converting Saul on the road to Damascus. ‘Johnny Chester!’ he repeated for the third time. Tegan wore an irritated scowl that told him some sort of explanation might be a really wise move. ‘You know . . . of the Star Jumpers? The beast of rock and roll? The only man to write a decent song about football, “Black and White on Fire”?’ He paused and then summed it all up in two words. ‘Johnny Chester!’

‘Never heard of him,’ said Tegan impatiently.

‘Good God,’ said Milligan. He got out of the car and pushed open the door to the record store. ‘What planet have you been on for the last decade?’

Tegan pondered this for moment as the door closed behind him. ‘Do you want a list?’ she asked no one in particular as she followed him.

Inside, the store was dark and crowded. At the far end, beneath a stark and grainy black-and-white enlarged photo of a toddler in a suburban garden, was a table at which sat a young man in his early thirties wearing a leather jacket and a white T-shirt. He had short, rusty-coloured hair, deep blue eyes mostly hidden behind tinted spectacles and an intelligent face tinged with a trace of tired sadness in the lines around his eyes. Here, Tegan instantly knew, was someone who had lived a lifetime or more of experiences in just a few short years. He was handsome, too, in a kind of streetwise, rugged, slept-in-my-own-mess-for-half-my-adult-life way. So, she thought, *this* was Johnny Chester.

Not half bad.

Tegan took a pace forward and, for a second, felt an unusual tingle up her spine as if someone has just walked over her grave. *Déjà vu*, she told herself. But that was something she never suffered from. She had the ridiculous feeling that this was somebody she had known for years, intimately. Then Tegan had an even more preposterous feeling that he was somebody she would come to know. She shook her head, gave him one more (cursory) glance and then busied herself flipping through the 'Rock L to Z' section whilst Dave Milligan stood in line to see his idol.

'So what's the most outrageous rock and roll thing you've ever done?' a teenage boy at the front of the queue was asking Johnny.

Johnny thought for a moment and then said, 'When I was at college, there were these hippies, out of their brains on Adam Strange who lived across the road. They were into Yes and Genesis and they used to scream abuse at me because I was fifty years younger than them and didn't have hair down my back and because I bought records by the Jam and the Clash and Buzzcocks. So one day, I set fire to their house in the name of rock and roll, because they were complacent soulless, dope-smoking deadheads, too stoned to live.'

'Is that true?' asked the boy. Arson as a statement seemed to have great appeal to him.

'Of course it's not, y'great tosser!' replied Johnny with a wink, and asked who he should make the book out to.

Dave Milligan waited for ten minutes, occasionally giving Tegan an apologetic glance, until he got to the front of the queue by which time she had found a book based on some old science-fiction TV show to read. In his hand Milligan held copies of the CDs *Modernism* and *Can Anyone Tell Me Where the Revolution Is?* 'I've already got these,' he told Johnny as he approached the table at last. 'But I might as well have them again.'

'Good man,' said Johnny cheerfully. 'Where you from, mate?'

'Leicester,' Milligan replied. 'I don't want to be a gushing fanboy nor nothing, but can I just tell you that "Circle Circus" changed my life?'

Johnny looked up and smiled wickedly. 'That was pretty gushing fanboy ... Sorry!'

'I know,' said Dave. 'I'm gutted about it!'

'Have a copy of the book too. On me,' said Johnny handing one across the desk. 'It's not bad, even if I do say so myself. Local author, apparently.' He started to sign the CDs.

Milligan looked at the lurid cover of a young man sticking a revolver into his mouth, finger on the trigger. He flipped it over and scanned the blurb on the back underneath a staggering photo of the author standing on a hill in Wiltshire wearing a 'Did you spill my pint' T-shirt. He didn't have the heart to tell Johnny that he already had a copy of this too.

‘See much of the other Star Jumpers these days?’ he asked. ‘Or is that an awkward question?’

Johnny Chester looked up and gave a practised, media-friendly smile that told Milligan this was about the twenty-ninth time he had been asked that question today alone. The answer had a similar much-rehearsed quality. ‘I see Marty and Kel. We’re still mates, we just do our different things now. We’re planning a live box-set, so I have meetings with them whenever they’re needed. They were playing in New York a couple of months back and I went along. We had dinner after the show, it was good.

‘I saw you at the Marquee in ’91 on the Seems Like a Freeze Out tour,’ said Dave, any non-gushing-fanboy pretensions fully exorcised by now. ‘Best gig I’ve ever seen.’

‘We were a cracking live band back then, just before it got too big and we stopped enjoying ourselves,’ noted Johnny. ‘So, what you doing in America?’

‘Same as you, I expect. Working!’

Johnny Chester laughed, and he and Dave clapped palms in a show of working-class solidarity. ‘Who shall I make these out to?’

‘Dave,’ said Dave.

‘Nice one, Dave. Listen, if you ever get over on the East Coast, look me up, we’ll have a beer, yeah?’ He passed his business card to Milligan who pocketed it and shook Johnny’s hand.

‘Look after yourself man,’ he said, and turned to leave.

‘You too, mate.’

Someone in the queue was asking Johnny what he was listening to these days. He started to reply, talking about how much he admired Boards of Canada, Mutant Mirrors, Jeff Hart and the Ruins and Dingo’s Ate My Baby, but his attention became focused on the young woman with auburn hair standing next to Milligan as he paid for his CDs and left the shop, and his voice trailed away.

‘Tegan?’ asked Johnny, a lump in his throat the size of the Isle of Wight.

But she was gone.

‘You look disappointed,’ said Tegan as Milligan followed her from the shop clutching the CDs and the book. ‘Did he turn out to have feet of clay then?’

‘No,’ said Milligan. ‘Nothing like that. Just the opposite in fact.’

‘Then what?’

Milligan shrugged. ‘They say never meet your heroes . . .’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘He was a nice guy,’ said Milligan. ‘Gave me a freebie and his card. Told me next time I was in his neighbourhood to give him a bell and we’d go for a drink.’

‘Sounds really down to Earth,’ Tegan noted.

‘That’s the problem,’ noted Milligan. ‘When I was sixteen I had a poster of that man on my bedroom wall. I learned to play the guitar because I wanted to be just like him. I learned every song, read every interview, dressed like him, thought like him . . .’

‘I still don’t see what the problem is,’ said Tegan.

There was a quiet despondency in Milligan’s voice. The sound of shattered teenage dreams. ‘I didn’t want him to be “down to Earth”,’ he noted sadly. ‘I wanted him to be like a god.’

After two hours of discussing every avenue open to them, the UNIT meeting had broken up. A vague plan had been formulated. Paynter and Barrington would continue to investigate InterCom undercover whilst the Doctor explored what he euphemistically referred to as ‘other options’.

Barrington and Paynter took the elevator to the underground car park beneath UNIT headquarters discussing how best to regain entry into the InterCom site.

‘Security’s going to be tighter than a camel’s eye in a sandstorm after the bomb,’ noted Paynter.

‘We’ll think of something. We always do.’

‘Getting in isn’t, necessarily, the problem though. I’m more worried about how we deal with whatever we find . . .’ Paynter paused and scowled angrily. ‘Damn and blast it,’ he said, turning back from the car and making for the elevator.

‘What’s the matter?’ called Barrington.

‘The camera,’ said Paynter. ‘I forgot to give the Brig and the Doctor the film of whatever it was in that clean room. I’ll be down in a minute.’

Barrington sat in the driver’s seat and shook his head. ‘He’d forget his head if it wasn’t screwed on,’ he muttered as he put the key into the ignition, turned it and died.

The blast was huge in the confined space. The low ceiling amplified the noise of the explosion, popping Paynter’s ears as he found himself falling, flung face forward on to the wet concrete beneath him. An absurd thought crossed his mind as he hit the ground sickeningly, headfirst and hard, that this was the second time in two days that he had been blown up and that somebody, somewhere really had it in for him.

Then the realisation of where, exactly, the bomb blast had come from cut through the fog in his mind. He felt the blood pouring from a gash above his eye and he knew that his grip on consciousness was tenuous at best, but he

managed to spin himself round, slowly and painfully, and sit up. What he saw made him wish he'd stayed where he was.

Barrington's hand was glued against the glass of the car window, a white silhouette surrounded by dancing orange flames and scorched fabric. His head, in fact his whole body except for the hand, was engulfed in fire. Once again, that pungent, sickly-sweet smell filled the air and Paynter's nostrils. It was a smell that had been with him for most of his adult life, but it was one he never got used to.

Paynter was still lucid enough to know that it was his friend frying in the middle of the funeral pyre that had once been a car. His friend who was turning black, as the flesh burnt from his bones in the inferno. And the worst thing about it was that every few seconds a little voice kept on reminding Paynter that, yes, it's Mark in there but hey, look on the bright side, it could have been you as well.

He could hear other voices now. Real ones. Alarmed, hysterical voices behind him somewhere in the direction of the stairs. But he kept staring at the atrocity in front of him wholly unable to tear his eyes away from the horror until, mercifully, shock took Paynter in her arms and dumped him into a blissful unconsciousness.

Chapter Twelve

Beyond Belief

The door burst open. Chung looked up from the file he was reading on his desk and tried his best to look like the concentration camp commandant in *Bridge on the River Kwai*. He didn't bother to hide the bottle of bourbon from which he had been drinking steadily for the last fifteen hours. There was no point – his breath stank of alcohol.

And of weariness and fear.

Despite many years of finely honing his detachment from humanity for scientific purposes, he still felt disturbed by the sight in front of him. Three InterCom guards dragged the beaten and bleeding Kyla O'Shaugnessy into the room. Chung extinguished his cigarette as the shouting girl was forced into a chair. One of the guards held her in a headlock so that she could only look directly at Chung Sen.

Chung stared back at the girl. Once, and not too long ago either, she had been beautiful. Now all of that had changed. Several hours of sustained, continuous, expert pummelling had seen to that. Her lips were swollen and fat, her eyes blackened and bloodied, her nose broken and her teeth loosened or missing.

'I trust you suffered,' he said at last.

'I've had worse,' replied Kyla, though her face was pinched with pain.

'Liar.' Chung sighed. He removed his glasses and felt a hollow sadness. 'You betrayed me Kyla,' he said, wiping the tiredness from his eyes. 'There are two things I deplore in life. Deceit and betrayal. I'm very disappointed in you.'

'Tell it to someone who's interested,' shouted the girl, ignoring the stranglehold that the guard tightened around her throat.

'I had such hopes for you. Such dreams ...' Chung stood and began to walk around his office. He stopped in front of a photograph of himself, Kyla and two colleagues taken eighteen months earlier in a Tokyo karaoke bar. It was shortly after she had first come to work for him. He had sung 'New York, New York' and she had done 'The Tracks of My Tears'. They had gone on to a teppan-yaki restaurant in Kawaguchi called the Fuji Yama.

'I had yakitori and yasai tempura,' he said, aloud. 'You had tori karaage.'

Behind him Kyla was laughing hysterically.

'What is funny?' screamed Chung, turning and slapping Kyla savagely across her already bruised face with the back of his hand.

There was no reply.

'I asked,' said Chung, with a degree of calm sadism in his voice. He slapped her again, and then a third time, back and forth. 'What. You found. So amusing?'

Four. Five. Slap. Slap.

'You've got the bullshit working overtime, haven't you?' said Kyla when he eventually stopped, spitting out a tooth that had freed itself.

Chung let out a long frustrated cry and slumped into his chair. 'Tell me where the disk is,' he said without emotion.

'No,' replied Kyla.

'That was the reply I expected,' said Chung. 'I shall not bother with the "we can do this the easy way or the hard way" nonsense because we both know that you aren't going to talk until you've been tortured. *Then* you'll tell me.'

'Not bloody likely,' said Kyla, laughing again.

Chung Sen tried his best war-criminal voice, even though he knew that he was merely mouthing clichés. 'Slow and extremely painfully torture,' he said. 'Or, we can go for the quick and painless option if you'd prefer.'

'I'll take slow and painful if it's all the same to you,' said Kyla defiantly.

'Very well,' replied Chung. He looked at one of the guards. 'Break all her fingers, one at a time. If that doesn't work attach electrodes to her nipples, or whatever else it is you do for fun with electricity.'

The guard holding Kyla in a headlock increased his pressure as the first of her fingers was snapped by his colleague.

Chung turned his back. He bit, deeply, into his lip as the second fingerbone was wrenched from its socket. He spun round whilst Kyla was still screaming to the rafters in agony and, impressively, in defiance.

Chung knelt beside her, stroking her hair. 'It can stop now,' he said.

Kyla cursed, viciously. And, as she did so, she spat in Chung's Face. 'See you in hell,' she said, and slumped back in the chair as the guards grabbed her hair and pulled her backwards.

Chung wiped the spittle from his cheek with his own misshapen fingers. 'Take her away,' he told the guards, removing his glasses to clean them. 'Do what you have to.'

'I hope you're finding this cathartic, slant-eyes,' said Kyla, her broken teeth grimacing into a leer of contempt as she was dragged from the room, leaving Chung alone with his bourbon.

A hand was stroking Turlough's chin. He smiled, though his eyes were still closed. The skin doing the stroking was soft and gentle and smelt of French

perfume.

'Hmmm.' He rolled towards the velvet touch of the hand and felt warmth on his thighs and stomach. Bodies touching, skin on skin. His eyes opened, in slow motion.

He was in Eva's apartment.

In Eva's bed.

With Eva.

Does not compute.

Turlough needed a moment to focus, but he didn't get it. 'Wake up sleepy-head,' said Eva drowsily, a grin on her face, her eyes, like Turlough's, half-closed against the harsh early morning sun pouring through the open windows of her apartment.

Does not compute.

Turlough couldn't find the connection he was looking for.

'That was some rough night we had. You were like a crazed dog.'

Does not compute. Definitely.

'Where ...?' Eva rolled away from him and Turlough found himself instinctively reaching out his hands to hold her. 'Don't go,' he said as she sat up, naked, and climbed out of bed.

'Coffee?' she asked, wrapping herself in a crumpled sheet.

Turlough felt dizzy and disorientated. He still fumbled for something in his mind that would tell him what was going on. Other than the obvious.

'No,' he said flatly. And he wasn't just talking about the coffee. 'Did we ...?'

'To the end, baby.'

'Right.'

Eva slipped back between the sheets and put her arms around Turlough. 'What's the matter?' She kissed him on the forehead and moved her hand down his arm, tickling the goose flesh.

'I ... I'm a bit ...' Turlough paused. 'Confused,' he confessed at length.

'Whatever,' said Eva dismissively. Another kiss full on the lips, teeth clashing, tongue on tongue.

'You taste all salty,' she said.

'Sorry,' mumbled Turlough, the fog still clouding him. He couldn't remember the last thing he *could* remember. The bar was clear enough. And the football game.

'Don't apologise, silly.' Eva ran a finger down Turlough's chest. 'You kept on talking about your friend last night. The Doctor. So is he for real then, or was that just a load of science-fiction bullshit to make me want to go to bed with you?' She paused. 'Not that it matters,' she whispered softly in his ear, before she began to nibble it.

'I told you about the Doctor?' asked Turlough incredulously.

'Yeah, before you got to the "I come from another planet, baby bit.'

Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no oh no . . .

Turlough sat bolt upright until his head screamed out in protest and he slumped back down again on to the soft pillow.

'I would never tell anyone . . .'

'Well you did,' Eva replied.

Turlough's mind was in free fall. Why would he be so stupid? He *knew* the rules.

And then he noticed the small needle-scar on his upper arm and, like a curtain parting before him, the fog cleared and he remembered.

Everything.

'Get away from me,' he said, pushing Eva as hard as he could. Panic took hold as he tried to unwrap himself from the bedclothes, but in his weakened state he only succeeded in collapsing on to the bedroom floor. And there he lay whilst Eva stood up and towered over him. A laughing succubus. Turlough whimpered softly, unable to do or say anything else.

The door in front of Turlough opened and Sanger and Joyce walked in as Eva hurriedly pulled on a bathrobe.

'Don't get dressed on my account,' said Sanger with a lustful, contemptuous smile.

Eva didn't reply. Instead she used her foot to flip Turlough over on to his back.

He lay dazed and paralysed, staring at the ceiling with a bemused expression.

'We were quite enjoying ourselves,' Joyce noted. But Sanger's face had changed to something more serious and businesslike.

'I told you this was a bad idea,' he said. 'It's time to stop playing games. We don't have the time.' He looked down at Turlough keenly. 'You're a long way from home,' he said simply.

'We've got what we've spent a decade looking for,' said Joyce. 'What's the problem? We just give him to Chung and extract his DNA.'

'Not yet,' said Sanger. 'We first need to find out what UNIT knows.'

The music that floated through the walls of Jon Newton's penthouse apartment was British Indie pop. All jingle-jangle-morning Rickenbacker guitars and fey harmonised vocals. Sam Danvers and Bill Quay hammering on the door was not an altogether inappropriate accompaniment.

After they had skinned their knuckles for about three minutes the door opened and an annoyed-looking Newton stood framed in the doorway wearing a Japanese kimono-style dressing gown, his hair an untidy mess.

'I thought I told you never to come here,' he hissed.

‘It was important,’ Sam said quickly. ‘Obviously.’

‘Then you’d better come in,’ said Newton, ushering them quickly through the door then checking the corridor to make sure they hadn’t been followed.

‘Don’t be so paranoid man,’ said Bill. Then he wished he hadn’t as Newton pushed him up against the breakfast bar of the exquisite apartment and grabbed both lapels, pulling him so close that he could smell the garlic on Newton’s breath.

‘You spastic,’ bawled Newton. ‘I didn’t get where I am today by taking unnecessary chances.’

‘Relax,’ interjected Sam, but Newton clearly wasn’t very interested in relaxing.

His face was so close to Bill’s that the big man could see the froth forming in his mouth. ‘If I tell you to jump, you ask “how high”, right?’ he spat.

‘You betcha,’ said Bill, turning his face away to avoid the garlic. And Newton’s insane stare.

‘Good,’ said Newton, releasing his grip, straightening Bill’s jacket collar and then giving him a playful punch in the kidneys that caused him to collapse moaning on to the floor. ‘Just so long as we know where we stand.’ He turned to Sam. ‘Some fresh orange juice, perhaps?’

‘Yeah, why not?’ replied Sam as Newton headed into the breakfast bar. ‘Nice place you’ve got here.’

‘I should hope so,’ said Newton. ‘It’s extravagantly expensive.’

As he said this, Hayley Tonkin emerged from the bedroom, a flannelette sheet wrapped around her as a makeshift toga. ‘Come back to bed,’ she said sleepily, before seeing Bill and Sam. ‘Oh, hi guys.’

‘Morning Hayley,’ said Sam.

‘Make yourself useful,’ demanded Newton. ‘Turn the music down and get the shower running. And put some clothes on.’

Hayley sauntered back into the bedroom and Newton shook his head. ‘Wanders round here butt-naked like a whale all day if you let her,’ he noted.

‘I didn’t know you and her were ... You know,’ said Bill standing up, still rubbing the small of his back.

‘Well we *are*,’ snapped Newton. ‘Want to make something of it?’

Bill Quay shrank backwards, feeling the cold, clammy touch of fear running her fingers up and down his spine. ‘No,’ he replied hurriedly, ‘I’m happy for you both. Really.’

‘Shut up, Bill,’ said an irritated Sam. ‘We’ve come with some news that might improve your temper,’ he told Newton.

Newton turned, two glasses of freshly squeezed orange juice in his hands. ‘“In the palace of stone and windows, the two little royals shall be carried”,’ he quoted.

'Which means . . . ?' asked Sam.

'Use your imagination. What's the story?'

'Bomb-type news,' said Bill eagerly. 'We got us a soldier boy. Nearly two.'

'I *like* this news,' said Newton with a manic grin. 'You know what the prophet said about this, don't you?'

'No,' replied Sam, 'but you're going to tell us, right?'

Newton opened a book on the breakfast bar and began to read. "'The London Chief, under the rule of America shall appoint a King who is the false Anti-Christ. He shall join them all together in discord.'"

'Which means?' asked Hayley emerging, clothed, from the bedroom.

'Which means, my love,' replied Newton, 'that it's time I made a phone call because there's somebody that you all really need to meet.'

'I don't like hospitals,' said the Doctor as he left Paynter's room with the Brigadier. 'People die in them.'

Lethbridge-Stewart was, however, preoccupied with more specific thoughts. 'Fine man that,' he said, glancing back at the door. 'One of the finest I've ever served with. I had him as a private and watched him go through the ranks like a rocket.'

'Yes,' agreed the Doctor, sharing the Brigadier's appreciation of Geoff Paynter's qualities. 'He always struck me as a very dedicated man. A bit rough around the edges, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing.'

The Brigadier nodded. 'It takes a particular sort of man to be able to watch his best friend burned alive and still come back for more. Which he will. But those chaps were thick as thieves, he and . . .' Lethbridge-Stewart paused and, despite the many men that he had seen die over the years in similar (and different) circumstances, seemed unable to say Barrington's name.

'I'm sorry about Barrington,' the Doctor added helpfully. 'Another good man.'

'It's never easy to lose someone under your command,' the Brigadier said at last as they reached reception and headed for the car park where Milligan was waiting for them. 'Paynter's first partner Paul Foxton was killed on active duty too, a decade ago. Captain Paynter always felt he was responsible.'

'What happened?'

Lethbridge-Stewart looked away from the Doctor as he remembered another death on another continent. 'They were in Baghdad infiltrating a Black Star cell. Foxton was inexperienced. He was a decent chap, very useful with a weapon, but he lost his nerve during a fire storm with the terrorists. It's Paynter's private hell.'

'We've all got them,' the Doctor noted. 'Locked rooms, shuttered and dark where we hide our secrets and our emotions.' He paused as they reached the

car. 'This is getting out of hand. It's becoming something of a bloodbath, Brigadier, people are getting killed.'

'Indeed,' conceded the Brigadier. 'And now I have to make a phone call to a mother to tell her that she no longer has a son. *That's* the reality of the situation, not aliens in the boardroom.'

'I think we might have stumbled into something in which the stakes are far higher than either you or I can imagine,' said the Doctor as they drove out of the dark car park and into the blinding Los Angeles sunlight.

'That isn't going to be of much consolation to Mrs Barrington,' replied the Brigadier.

If the Doctor agreed with this sentiment he kept his thoughts to himself. As the car moved on to Mulholland Drive, he looked out of the window at the flashing images of Americana that sped by him. Green-boxed street signs with exotic, exciting place names. Towering palm trees lining the road. Neon shop fronts, delis, 7-11s and grocery stores. Yellow school buses. Bright, gaudy, plastic and utterly alien to him. The ramrod-straight six-lane freeway seemed a perfect metaphor for his inability to find an exit and get back on to the side roads where some answers might be hidden. And meanwhile, all around him, the buildings towered ever upwards blocking out the light.

The Brigadier looked at the collection of papers in front of him and tutted loudly as he read about yet another Chinese satellite being launched. 'That's about four this week,' he exaggerated. 'If they keep going up at this rate, there'll be nothing of space left for anyone else!'

'Do you ever wish that you had never started something, Brigadier?' the Doctor asked, changing the subject completely.

'Frequently,' replied Lethbridge-Stewart drily. 'But if we never start anything, we never achieve anything, do you see?'

'Sadly, Brigadier, I do. And there's the irony.' The Doctor was clearly troubled. 'I'd like you to do something for me that neither of us is going to find very palatable.'

'If it helps to stop the killing, then, yes, I'll do it and damn whether I can stomach it or not,' replied the Brigadier.

But the Doctor still looked unhappy at the situation into which he and his friends had been forced. 'When I alluded to wishing I had never started something, I wasn't just referring to this particular assignment. In my time, I have made certain alliances that ...' The Doctor paused. 'That do not stand up to close scrutiny.'

'Meaning?'

The Doctor looked away from the Brigadier once more. Out of the window and into the real world. 'That I'm not proud of them,' he said simply, still unable to face his old friend.

'We all find ourselves sleeping with the enemy at times, Doctor. That's just a fact of life. What do you want me to do?'

The Doctor sighed. 'I'd like you to set up a meeting ...' Again he paused. 'A meeting with the CIA.'

Chapter Thirteen

Strange Town

‘Poor Mark,’ Natalie said to Tegan as they approached Geoff Paynter’s hospital room. ‘He was the sweetest man. You’d never think of him as a soldier. Kind, thoughtful, a humanitarian. Always trying to help others. Not to mention being drop-dead gorgeous.’

‘Not perhaps the most appropriate phrase,’ said Tegan as they reached the door.

Natalie flung a hand up to her mouth. ‘I’m such a dimwit,’ she said, embarrassed tears filling her eyes.

‘Come on,’ said an irritated Tegan, grabbing the UNIT woman’s shoulders. ‘You don’t want to let that sexist windbag Paynter see you like this?’

‘Captain Paynter’s a complicated man,’ Natalie replied, with a faint smile. ‘But he does pinch my bum with monotonous regularity.’

‘The swine,’ mocked Tegan. ‘He must be stopped!’

They found Paynter sitting up in bed wearing the worst pair of hospital pyjamas that Tegan had ever seen. He was smiling, but this obviously belied the way he was truly feeling.

‘Hello girls,’ he said brightly. ‘You didn’t manage to sneak a bottle of Jack Daniels under the radar by any chance did you?’

‘Fraid not,’ replied Natalie. ‘And we didn’t bring you any grapes either.’

‘Every cloud has a silver lining,’ noted Paynter.

‘How are they treating you?’

‘I should be getting out tomorrow,’ he replied. His false jollity was evident in the awkward silence after he stopped talking.

‘I’m sorry about your friend,’ said Tegan, sick of the pointless small talk. ‘I’ve seen someone close to me die and I know what you’re going through if that’s any consolation.’

Now she saw another side of Paynter, briefly. A deeply hidden side. ‘It’s like having a part of you ripped away,’ he said softly. The shattering loss was clearly there, inches beneath the surface. He hid his feelings well, she gave him credit for that much, but the veneer was in danger of peeling away and allowing the world to look at the vulnerable, confused, hurt man beneath. She could almost have hugged Paynter at that moment.

Almost, but not quite.

'I know,' said Natalie sympathetically, sitting on the side of the bed and stroking his arm. 'But life goes on.'

'And we, however reluctantly, have to go on with it,' added Tegan. She was thinking of Aunt Vanessa now. How had she coped with that? By getting in a time machine and being kidnapped, that's how.

'I know all that,' noted Paynter. 'It's not the first time I've had this happen to me. But that doesn't make it any easier. You'd think it would, but it doesn't.'

Natalie kissed him and stood up. 'You poor thing,' she said as she began to cry again.

Tegan was visibly appalled.

Thankfully, Sergeant Milligan arrived at that moment, looking furtively around him as he came into the room.

'All right Dave,' said Paynter, brightly. 'Surely *you* brought me some booze?'

Milligan triumphantly produced a bottle of Jack Daniels from beneath his overcoat and thrust it into Paynter's hands.

'Hide it quick,' he said. 'There's a twenty-stone nurse following me about. I think she's got alcohol sonar.'

'Nice one,' said Paynter with a cheeky grin, slipping the bottle beneath his bedclothes. 'How you doing?'

Milligan was forthright. 'A lot better than you are by the look of things, skip. Who the hell is trying to kill us all?'

'Search me,' replied Paynter. 'What does the Doctor reckon?'

'He and the Brig are planning to fly to San Francisco tomorrow for some reason that they didn't see fit to let me in on. 'Cos, like. I'm only a sergeant, you know? They *did* give me some orders concerning you though.'

'Oh yes?' Paynter looked worried.

Milligan sensed the panic he was causing. 'And Miss Tegan,' he continued.

'I don't like the sound of this at all,' said Tegan.

By the expression on his face, neither did Paynter.

The car that met the Doctor and the Brigadier at San Francisco airport was a long black limousine with tinted-glass windows. Entering it, they felt as though they were crawling into the belly of a rattlesnake.

The landmarks of one of the most beautiful cities on Earth flashed by them as they drove through Golden Gate Park at high speed. But neither the Time Lord nor the soldier seemed particularly interested in their surroundings. Both were unusually nervous and dry-throated and they spoke little during the journey. When they did, it was in monosyllabic and conspiratorial whispers.

In the front seat, their CIA driver appeared to be not the slightest bit interested in the men he was delivering to his superiors. But both the Doctor and the Brigadier knew how little faith to place in such appearances.

‘What do you expect from this?’ asked the Brigadier in a low voice.

‘I couldn’t possibly comment on that Brigadier,’ the Doctor said more loudly, nodding towards the back of the driver’s head. ‘Chicanery and double-bluff I’d have said.’

‘No change there then?’

‘Not really.’

Once they had arrived at the CIA offices it seemed to take an eternity for the elevator to get them to the twenty-ninth floor, but when it did they were both in for a surprise.

‘Well, look here,’ said a familiar voice as they were ushered into an underlit office. Control stepped out of the shadows with a broad grin. ‘Ally, boy. I haven’t laid eyes on you in like, for ever.’

The Brigadier looked closely at the little man. A flood of memories threatened to drown him. Of Area 51 Nevada, the Nedenah and the sarcastic son of a bitch who was standing before him now, looking not a day older than he had in 1970. ‘You’ve aged well,’ he said flatly, looking at this keeper of the purple twilight as Control seated himself at his desk and smiled a bland and dangerously friendly smile.

With friends like this who, indeed, requires deadly enemies?

‘Wish I could say the same for you, Ally,’ replied Control. ‘But frankly, I’d be lying if I did. Aren’t you getting a bit old for this sort of thing?’

Lethbridge-Stewart managed to keep his dignity despite the vicious sarcasm. ‘That’s one opinion,’ he said. ‘Not one I happen to share.’

‘Whatever,’ said Control, turning his attention to the Doctor. ‘And this must be your latest Time Lord?’

‘I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,’ said the Doctor charmingly. ‘I’m the Doctor.’

‘Which one are you?’

‘Fifth.’

‘Oh, the vulnerable one,’ replied Control contemptuously. ‘Well, you’d better sit down before you have an accident. I couldn’t have that on my conscience, could I?’

The atmosphere in the room was thick with tension. The Doctor and the Brigadier both sat down, gently, as though terrified that the plush leather armchairs were about to eat them alive.

Fortunately, this didn’t happen.

‘So,’ said Control, with a gesture of welcome, ‘what brings Europe’s top boys in the let’s be nice to aliens party to my home-boy turf?’

'Rumours of our appeasing aliens seem to have been greatly exaggerated,' began Lethbridge-Stewart. 'You, of all people, should know that after we put a stop to your fantasy in Nevada.'

'Is that what you think you did?' asked Control, hugely amused by this suggestion. 'Well, that's one opinion,' he continued, parroting the Brigadier. 'Not one I share.'

'This is a waste of time,' said the Brigadier, turning to his friend.

'Possibly,' replied the Doctor. He looked at Control carefully. 'On the other hand we've come a long way. It seems a pity to turn round now.'

'Indeed,' replied Control. 'If you do that, you might not live to regret it.'

'Is that a threat?' asked Lethbridge-Stewart, half-standing and reaching for his Browning pistol. Until he remembered that they'd taken his weapon from him at reception.

'No,' said Control emotionlessly. 'It's a prediction based on intelligence. *My* intelligence. Now sit down you old fool, before you have a heart attack.'

'Interesting,' noted the Doctor. 'Nevertheless, this charade is an insult to *our* intelligence, as I'm sure you'll agree.'

And so the square dance continued. The Doctor and Control batting non sequiturs back and forth like tennis players with Lethbridge-Stewart stuck on the sidelines watching the action. The meeting remained tense and the CIA man seemed less than keen to divulge anything of great consequence but, as the Doctor answered each and every cutting insult with a considered, often equally biting, reply, the Brigadier could sense that Control was beginning to thaw. That the Doctor was actually getting through the tough little spy's defences to whatever it was that made him tick.

When Control made some fatuous comment about having all the time in the world, the Doctor had the opening in the conversation that he had been looking for.

'Time,' he said. 'That's a really difficult concept for a human to grasp.'

'Do you think so?' asked Control. 'I've always been very comfortable with the theory.'

'Which probably tells me more about you than it does about humanity,' noted the Doctor. 'Time is subjective.'

'Subjectivity is objective.'

'Gosh, that was witty Wilde,' said the Doctor with a wry grin. 'What do you know about the Sons of Nostradamus?'

'That would be telling!'

The Brigadier sighed deeply, but the Doctor shot him a quick look that told both Lethbridge-Stewart and Control that progress was being made, and that the Doctor knew it was.

'I know you possess only limited information about both the terrorists and Sanger's organisation,' said the Doctor. 'In fact, we probably know as much as you do. Just not, necessarily, the same bits!'

'I think that's a fair assumption,' conceded Control. It was the first straight answer that he had given.

'So,' said the Doctor. 'You tell us what you know, and we tell you what we know ...'

'And then we both know what each other knows?'

'That's the general idea,' noted the Doctor.

Control thought about this for a moment. 'Fascinating concept,' he said after a long pause. 'Not sure I entirely understand what's in it for me ...'

'For God's sake man,' said the Brigadier angrily, 'we're talking about a possible alien invasion of Earth. What's in it for you is to help stop it happening.'

'Don't be so melodramatic,' said Control. 'It's always the same with you. "The end is nigh"! You wanna form an alliance with the Jehovah's Witnesses, they'd love you. Did we complain when MI6 took over the operation of International Electromatics and kept all that groovy alien technology for themselves. And for you guys?'

'Actually you did,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Quite vociferously as I remember.'

Control's righteous indignation finally bubbled, unwittingly to the surface and he laughed sarcastically at the Englishman. 'And now you have the nerve to hold conferences because other people are getting their hands on it!'

The Brigadier smiled and stared back at the CIA chief, unblinking.

'Surely it's in everyone's interests to make sure that the Earth doesn't fall, yes? Even the CIA's?' asked the Doctor.

'Yes, *technically* I suppose. In theory.'

The Brigadier was appalled. The Doctor merely intrigued. 'We know that InterCom is a front organisation for an alien conglomerate,' he said with the merest trace of a smile.

Control ignored the clear implication in the Doctor's statement that this was not something that only applied to InterCom. 'We figured that out a long time ago,' he said in a clear example of one-upmanship. 'Did you know that they have a spacecraft in their complex in Los Angeles?'

'Yes,' said the Brigadier dismissively. 'Old news.'

'And did you know they're running DNA experiments looking for humans who can withstand increased heat, sonic attack and air pressure? I'll bet you didn't!'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'You are correct.'

'Now why do you think they'd be doing that?'

The Doctor sat in silence, a river of information being processed within his mind at the speed of light. Connections were made. It was all starting to fall into place.

'It's about changing the world, isn't it? Climate, the atmosphere. The very air that you breathe.'

Control simply stared back at the Doctor, his face like that of a poker player at the height of a game.

'But it *is*, isn't it?' argued the Doctor. 'They want to make the Earth habitable for themselves, but they're going to need slave labour to extract whatever it is that this planet has in abundance that they need.'

'An absurd suggestion,' said Control. But there was genuine puzzlement in his next question. 'Such as ...?' he asked. The Doctor nodded approvingly. That was what the CIA hadn't managed to work out yet either.

'Oh, I don't know, say ... Uranium?'

Control looked genuinely disappointed.

'Plutonium?'

'Too linear, Doctor. Too obvious.'

'All right, so they want a massive slave labour force, because ... Because they *do*,' said the Doctor, as though the final piece in a 20,000-piece jigsaw had just been handed to him and the picture on the box was suddenly making sense.

'Enlightenment,' said Control. 'It's a wonderful thing, so it is!' The Doctor was delighted by this revelation. 'And the terrorists?' he asked quickly.

'Don't be led astray by anorakphobia,' Control noted. 'External forces are also at work in that field of operation,' he added euphemistically.

Finally, the Brigadier understood something from the conversation. 'Sanity at last. Are you saying that these terrorists as well as Sanger's organisation are backed by the aliens?'

Control simply smiled.

'But that's preposterous. They're trying to kill each other.'

'Nobody said, Brigadier,' noted the Doctor, 'that they are the *same* aliens.'

In his luxury Tokyo apartment, Chung Sen sat in the semidarkness watching mind-numbing manga-cartoon violence on his forty-two-inch television screen.

It helped to shut out the pain.

'Total armageddon mayhem,' screamed a cartoon cyborg as its arm transformed into a chain saw and it sliced some sort of green-skinned alien creature in two. Normally Chung Sen would have been amused by the absurdity of it all, but right now he was burying himself up to his neck in the misery.

The pain of betrayal.

Distantly he was aware of a knocking on his door and, after a few moments while this information played around the periphery of his consciousness, he slowly stood up from the sofa and crossed to the door like a man walking towards his own execution. His eyes briefly flashed back to the television and to some cartoon schoolgirls in short skirts singing a popular song about a boy who had fallen in love with an android.

Chung was almost in a trance as he opened the door. He expected to be faced by an InterCom colleague of many years standing, with a gun in his hand and an apologetic look on his face.

He got two out of three, which wasn't a bad average, he thought. Nevertheless, the gun was missing and that made him curious.

'What?' he asked Shajo wearily.

'The girl,' replied the security man. 'She's dead.'

Chung nodded. And then became angry when the relief that he wasn't about to be shot in the head had sunk in. 'You've come all this way to tell me that? You could have used the videolink . . .'

'No I could not,' Shajo hissed through gritted teeth. 'There were things about her death that couldn't be broadcast even on a secure channel.'

Chung shook his head, his clashing emotions forcing him back into his apartment. Shajo followed him.

'The disk?' asked Chung slumping on to the sofa. The schoolgirls were gone now, replaced by an epic underwater battle between a purple squid and an oceanic army of men in diving suits. He found himself unable to take his eyes away from the screen, even when the programme was interrupted by an advert for eggs.

'No,' replied Shajo, 'she died without revealing the whereabouts of the disk. She was stubborn and bitter and by the end quite insane, but she told us nothing.'

Chung nodded. 'Good for her,' he whispered in quiet admiration.

'There's one other thing you should know,' said Shajo, closing the door and turning on the lights.

Chung blinked at him like a small woodland creature caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. 'What is it?'

'She wasn't human.'

Chapter Fourteen

Treason (It's Just a Story)

Once Greaves, Control's weasel-like assistant, had ushered the Brigadier and the Doctor back to their car, Lethbridge-Stewart's anger should have begun to subside. But it didn't. And still the Doctor said nothing as the car sped through the cross-town traffic towards the airport.

Some small talk was exchanged for the benefit of the driver. The weather (unusually inclement for the time of year), the city (a strange mixture of the old and the new) and absent friends (concerning Mike Yates's last known whereabouts in Tibet).

It was only when they were through the security cordon in the airport and safely back on the UNIT helicopter that would return them to Los Angeles that the Brigadier's feelings found an outlet.

'Well *that* was a complete waste of time,' he thundered. 'God's on our side and so is Washington. Allegedly.'

'Do you think so?' asked the Doctor. 'I thought it told us rather a lot.'

Lethbridge-Stewart was angry and he wanted the Doctor to know just how angry he was. 'I wish you'd tell me what, Doctor, because at the present moment in time I'm none the wiser about *anything*. In fact, I think I know less now than I did when I went in there.'

The Doctor smiled and summed up. 'We know what the aliens want,' he said simply.

'Which is?'

'To control the media to aid them in a forthcoming invasion. That much is obvious, surely?'

'Yes,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. And now he came to think about it, that much *was* obvious. Staggeringly so.

At last, the Doctor sensed that he could clarify the connections. 'But they wanted Turlough for a specific reason and, thanks to our ageless friend in the CIA, we now know what that is.'

'I'm listening . . .'

The Doctor sighed, as though he were attempting to explain nuclear fusion to a lobster. 'Turlough is an alien, yes?'

The Brigadier shrugged. 'If you say so.'

'You were his maths teacher for goodness sake, didn't you know *that?*'

'No,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'I was told he came from Coventry!'

This amused the Doctor greatly. 'The planet he comes from is a drab and colourless place, hot and gaseous. Very unlike Coventry. Well, the drab and colourless . . .' He stopped, and steered the conversation back to where he wanted it to go. 'Turlough can survive easily enough in Earth's atmosphere, but it makes him asthmatic and prone to bouts of nausea and migraine . . .'

The Brigadier nodded. 'He used those excuses to get out of PE. I always thought he was swinging the lead, personally. By the way, which planet *does* he come from?'

'Do you know,' said the Doctor, 'that's a question that's never cropped up in the conversation. He's always been rather vague about it. But it's not important at the moment. The aliens need Turlough's DNA because they want to use it to make human beings resistant to extreme heat and a thin atmosphere filled with toxic gases and, at the same time, increase their physical strength so that they become an effective slave race. The aliens can't use their own DNA because they're dying. I've seen this sort of thing before on other worlds. I know who the aliens are, Brigadier.'

'At last,' said the Brigadier. 'Some proper answers.'

'It's a long and complicated story,' the Doctor said.

'Isn't it always?' asked Lethbridge-Stewart.

The Doctor was forced to concede that, yes, it usually was.

The coven met on this occasion in the crypt of an abandoned church in Santa Monica. Sam had arrived with a bag of cannabis which he had acquired from Pete the Longhair, a former member of the group whom Newton had thrown out after Pete looked at him in a funny way. Pete now ran the Head and Magik Shoppe on Benedict Canyon Drive.

Long before Newton had to start hitting anyone they were falling over anyway, intoxicated by the drug and the ambient, trippy soundtrack on Lynda's ghetto-blaster.

Newton was in a weird, feeble frame of mind, constantly muttering quotations from two of Nostradamus's quatrains, as if they answered every question he was asked by his followers.

He had an edgy, paranoid look in his eyes that unsettled just about everyone and they all decided that once the cannabis had kicked in properly they would just sit down, shut up and let him get on with it.

'Par grand discord la trombe tremblera, accord rompu, dressant la teste au ciel. Do you see? "In the great war, the trumpet shall be sounded and agreements broken, lifting the leader to Heaven." Then shall come the true destiny.

“The exiles, carried to the Isles, at the whim of that most cruel King shall be murdered and put to the fire.” It is written.’

The coven added their agreement. This pleased Newton, who nodded wisely. ‘We are the chosen few,’ he said at length. ‘I have brought you here today to this place because it is time for you to meet another true believer.’

This was met with silence.

‘A believer,’ repeated Newton to a row of twelve blank faces. ‘C’mon, what’s the matter with you? What do you say when you’re introduced to one of the Faith?’

There was some vague muttering, but few discernible words.

‘It is written. Serpents to the left of me, scorpions to the right of me, demons before me. Seven times damn ye and seven times be ye damned,’ began Newton encouragingly.

‘This shall be the *whole* of the law,’ continued the coven, automatically.

From the shadows of the crypt a figure emerged. Tall and muscular, with hair cropped close to the skull.

‘Please allow me to introduce myself,’ he said, with a sinister flourish.

Newton bowed and waved his hand dramatically.

‘My name is Ryman,’ said Shaun Ryman, perhaps expecting recognition and gasps of astonishment and terror. Instead, he found himself staring into the blank eyes of twelve stoned masks. ‘Our goals are within reach, but you are too weak and stupid to even realise this.’ He paused and looked at Newton. ‘I didn’t expect much, but these are a grave disappointment I must say.’

‘What’s wrong with them?’ asked Newton crossly.

‘A bunch of potheads,’ said Ryman. ‘It’s time you realised just exactly with whom you are dealing.’

‘Fine,’ said Newton eagerly. ‘Just show us the Sign.’

Ryman ripped his shirt open, and then the skin from his chest. ‘Will *this* do?’ the thing that had been Ryman asked as its face disintegrated.

Twilight over Death Valley. A staggering sight for those who have never seen the sky on fire.

One moment the desert sands were baking in the full blaze of a sun high in the clear azure sky. The next, quite unexpectedly, in the blinking of an eye, unearthly brilliant shades of ultraviolet, crimson and orange tinged the sky and the day was almost done. Mutated shards of light streaked across the vista beneath the rapidly forming clouds and the night descended, hovered and then settled itself over the land like a blanket.

Milligan, Tegan and Paynter had spent most of the day flying over the Bernadino Hills and the Mojave desert in a UNIT helicopter, crossing into

Nevada and following the Colorado river to a tiny, unmarked US Air Force base near Boulder City.

Now they were in a staff car with malfunctioning air conditioning on the final stretch of Highway 95 approaching Las Vegas, a bright, multifaceted jewel gleaming spectacularly on the distant horizon.

Paynter was quite upbeat all things considered, looking on a three-day R and R order as a licence to forget about the problems back in Los Angeles and actually have a bit of fun. Tegan, on the other hand, was sullen and disinterested, furious that the Doctor had parcelled her off with the army whilst he continued to poke into dangerous situations. And, even more importantly, she still couldn't get Turlough's abduction out of her mind. It seemed ludicrous to go on *holiday* in the middle of an adventure as dangerous and confusing as this, but that was what the Doctor was making her do.

Tegan had told him she felt like a child being patronised, and he had made a few soothing noises about needing some breathing space. So she accepted the situation with her customary bad grace. Only more so than usual.

She enjoyed Dave Milligan's company well enough, she was forced to admit. He was friendly and witty and seemed to know when to laugh, when to nod and say nothing and when to tell her that what she really needed most was a vodka and orange with ice and, hey, didn't he know just the place for one.

Paynter, on the other hand, she just couldn't get a handle on. He was boorish and arrogant and everything else that Tegan hated most in life. Yet she could not, despite herself, forget the brief glimpse she'd had in the hospital of a vulnerable, slightly melancholy man who had seen too much horror. He reminded her of a character from a story she remembered from her childhood. Ichabod Crane in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. A man in search of a mythical terror to fight in place of the real ones that haunted his world. Perhaps, once Paynter found this terror he would have some peace. And so would the rest of the world.

'You been in the desert before, love?' asked Paynter casually.

Tegan considered a long-winded reply about how northern Queensland was all desert. But then she thought better of it. 'A few times,' she said simply and carried on looking out of the window at the curtain of night that was falling around them.

'Weird place this,' Milligan told no one in particular. 'Like Salisbury Plain. Very *X-Files*, know what I'm saying?'

'Oh yeah,' noted Paynter. 'That Area 51's around here somewhere isn't it? Very much a hot spot for activity. You want to read the Waro mission logs, it's a textbook case-file for this part of the world. Some of the scientific advisers believe it's something to do with the fault line – that it's an energy source.'

'In a country this size there's bound to be somewhere that's a magnet for

spooky goings-on,' continued Milligan. 'A guy I met in a bar reckons it's all the CIA doing covert operations with black helicopters. He said aliens don't exist. I didn't have the heart to tell him otherwise!'

'Innit marvellous?' asked Paynter cynically. 'Everyone's a critic.'

Tegan briefly wondered if the conversation was leading somewhere but she didn't have the chance to find out as the Star Jumpers CD suddenly cut out. It was followed, a second later, by the car itself.

'What the . . . ?' Milligan gave Paynter a puzzled sideways glance as the car slowed almost to a standstill. 'It's dead.'

'Can't be,' said the captain, opening the door and stepping on to the deserted highway. The car had rolled the final few feet to the side of the road and stopped there, all power drained from it. 'This is bizarre,' noted Paynter. 'Try the lights . . .'

'Nothing's working, skipper,' said Milligan. 'The battery must be flat.'

In the dull fading light Paynter looked less than convinced. He stood with his hands on his hips gazing towards the lights of Las Vegas in the distance. 'What do you estimate, Dave?'

'Twenty-five miles. Maybe thirty.'

'That's what I was thinking, maybe a touch more.'

Paynter picked up a small stone from the side of the road and threw it, angrily, into the desert. Where it bounced, a puff of dust flew up in a miniature mushroom cloud. 'Damn and bugger it, that's *all* we need.' He turned with a rueful smile. 'Oh well,' he continued. 'Worse things happen at sea. I suppose we'd better get the suitcases open, bed down here and wait for first light. Ifs a pity, I was looking forward to a hot shower.' He gave Tegan an apologetic look that still managed to seem offensive to her. 'I'd get another pair of tights on if I were you, love, it gets a bit nippy in the car when there's no heat on!'

'Shouldn't we keep moving?' Tegan asked, not unreasonably. She wasn't overjoyed at the thought of spending a night with these two jokers. Well, one of them, anyway.

'I doubt you'd enjoy yomping through the desert in high heels and a miniskirt,' noted Paynter sarcastically.

Milligan chuckled at the image Paynter had conjured up. Then he attempted to placate the scowling woman. 'The temperature at night in the desert drops really low Tegan,' he said. 'The car will be like an icebox, but it'll be marginally warmer than outside. If we get well wrapped up we'll be all right.'

Tegan was beginning to shiver already. 'I knew this was a bad idea,' she said.

Paynter was moving to the boot of the car to remove his kitbag. 'You and me both,' he muttered. He took another look at the distant city and it seemed

to Tegan that he was reflecting that somewhere within the dancing lights on the horizon fortunes were being won and lost. Then he looked at the sky.

'Holy Jesus,' he said suddenly. The others followed his gaze across the desert to a series of bright lights that were swooping out of the sky at a phenomenal speed and hovering several hundred yards to the right of the UNIT car.

Time seemed to stand still, at least to Tegan. The lights were stationary for an impossibly long time. Like something wading through treacle, they seemed to be inert and lifeless. She suddenly realised that she had caught her breath and hadn't bothered to release it. Feeling slightly light-headed she did, and was shocked at how loud it sounded. Everywhere else there was a glistening silence.

'That's a Comanche stealth helicopter, right?' asked Milligan, shattering the moment like a brick through a window. 'USAF. Or one of those new reconnaissance planes, yeah?'

'You reckon?' asked Paynter sarcastically without taking his eyes from the lights in the sky. He was clearly unconvinced.

The lights were coming closer, slowly. They were part of a circular object, elongated at the sides into an egg shape. The lights strobed in a three-second pattern that was both calming and hypnotic. Tegan had her car door open and was standing beside Paynter in the eerie blue-white light.

'Got to be. What's the alternative?' asked Milligan, scrambling over the passenger seat to join them.

'I didn't know you were a UFO virgin,' Paynter said, as the lights sped towards them and flashed over the car at otherworldly speed. 'You've had the briefings even if you've never seen one before.'

High above them, the lights in the sky continued to pulse at regular intervals as they grew more distant until they merged and became merely one tiny, brilliant speck of starlight.

'It looks like Jupiter or one of those Chinese satellites,' Milligan noted as the lights finally disappeared from view. 'I never realised they shone like that. So brightly.'

'That was a UFO,' said Tegan excitedly.

'Well done!' replied Paynter. 'Seen one alien transportation vessel, seen them all. Now let's get inside before we freeze to death!'

Chapter Fifteen

Surfing Blind

There were few meetings of the conglomerate that were not extraordinary in as many senses as that word can apply to. But even by the unique standards of the InterCom board this was more unusual than most.

Dozens of black Cadillacs were parked next to an isolated ranch house twenty-five miles north of Los Angeles, in the shade of a forest of Californian oak trees and fronting a wide lake. Beside them, dozens of men in dark suits and dark glasses were huddled, keenly watching the only approach road for any stirring of dust that would signal the arrival of unwanted visitors.

Inside, despite an agenda of 'business as usual', as always with the conglomerate the bizarre was never too far away.

'Although the problems with the Japanese operation have been largely dealt with by the elimination of that Australian girl, or whatever she really was, we cannot afford to be complacent. There is still the possibility, however small, that she was able to pass details of our operation to our enemies.' Sanger paused and was surprised by the uneasy mumbling that followed this dramatic announcement. 'Gentlemen please,' he said, 'there will be plenty of opportunity for questions at the appropriate time.'

'I take it Chung Sen has been liquidated?' asked Elphistone nervously.

Sanger looked genuinely appalled by such a prospect. 'Not at all,' he told the English representative. 'Chung Sen has been, and remains, vitally important to the success of this project. All of us owe him a great deal. I see no reason to . . . What's the phrase?' he asked, turning to Michelle Stonebringer.

'Throw the baby out with the bath water?' she suggested.

'Exactly. We shall have need of Chung when phase three of implementation is under way. Unless, of course, you know of any other scientists of his calibre on this forsaken hole of a planet?'

'He allowed his wretched libido to make decisions for him,' said Bois angrily.

'But of course,' soothed Sanger. 'He is only human after all!'

The entire conglomerate began to laugh uproariously. Finally, Sanger called the meeting to order. 'I'm therefore ordering the closure of the Okenawa site and transferring all the merchandise back here.'

'Isn't that dangerous?' asked Joyce. 'You're putting all our eggs in one basket.'

'An interesting phrase,' said Sanger. 'You're even beginning to sound like one of *them*.'

Joyce wasn't used to being insulted by anyone, even Sanger. 'I thought that was the whole idea,' he replied pithily. There was a murmur of agreement from most of the rest of the group.

Sanger shrugged. 'We have no choice,' he noted. 'The programme must proceed. If we waste time trying to plug leaks that may not even exist then we play into *their* hands.' He paused and turned to Giresse. 'I'd value your comments at this juncture.'

'Are you looking for support, Paolo?' asked the Frenchman.

'I'm looking for common sense.'

Giresse didn't say anything for a moment, and several of the other members of the conglomerate, including Bois and Elphistone, began to make their thoughts known, in some cases loudly. Sanger banged on the table. 'Let him speak,' he urged.

'I agree that it is an insanely dangerous ploy,' Giresse said at length. 'However, it may be our best, indeed our only option.'

'Thank you,' said Sanger warmly. He looked at the group. 'And you,' he continued, 'would do well to remember just how much we have achieved here. And how much we have to lose.'

'We do Paolo,' answered Pavel Luvik. 'And we all know what happens if we fail. Both to us personally, and to our race. It's just that with the stakes being so high ...'

Sanger seemed satisfied with this. 'They may be higher than you think,' he replied. 'We have reliable information that a Canavitchi reconnaissance ship was spotted over the Nevada desert late yesterday evening.'

'You didn't tell me that!' said Giresse, half-standing, with a look of dismay that was echoed on faces around the rest of the room.

There was anger in Sanger's voice now. 'I only received the intelligence from Shaun this morning.'

'So that explains why Ryman isn't here?' asked Bois.

'No, actually I was expecting him to be,' replied Sanger, his voice implying that he was angry that his security chief had something more important to do.

'What are we going to do?' asked Giresse.

Sanger noticed the slight trace of panic in Giresse's voice. 'Well, I know what I'm going to do,' he said. 'I'm going to make sure that progress is made on the project as soon as possible. What I'm not going to do is sit around here on this ball of mud and wait for my executioners to arrive.'

* * *

‘They’re called the Jex,’ shouted the Doctor above the roar of the helicopter rotor blades.

‘J-E-C-K-S?’ asked the Brigadier hurriedly scribbling in his leather-bound notebook.

‘No, J-E-X.’

‘Damn.’ Lethbridge-Stewart crossed out what he had written so far and started again. ‘And . . . they are what, exactly?’

‘Aliens,’ noted the Doctor.

Lethbridge-Stewart was not amused. ‘Well I know that,’ he said impatiently. ‘I meant of what sort?’

‘Particularly nasty ones,’ replied the Doctor sadly. ‘But then, isn’t that usually the case? Just for once wouldn’t it be nice if an intergalactic race turned up and said “Hello, we come in peace . . .”.’

‘Doctor!’ cried the Brigadier. ‘Far be it from me to interrupt your brave but useless show of compassion, but some useful information would be . . .’

‘Useful?’

The Brigadier gave the Doctor a lethal stare and then returned his attention to his notes. ‘Can you tell me anything about them?’

It took the Doctor several seconds to reply. As though, again, he was searching within his extensive computer-like memory for a fragment of information about the creatures. Something that would satisfy Lethbridge-Stewart’s thirst for knowledge. ‘They were once a hugely powerful corporate empire-building race. They would have been the prime candidates for this little stunt right from the beginning. Except that nothing has been heard of them in the last couple of thousand years. I certainly didn’t know they had any interest in Earth.’

‘So, they haven’t visited us before?’

‘Good gracious no,’ replied the Doctor. ‘They’re from the Cassiopeia system on the other side of the galaxy. Never been within a million parsecs of here. If they had, you would know about it, believe me.’

‘But you said that you had met them before?’

‘Yes,’ noted the Doctor. ‘I ran into them on an ice world in the star system Rifta. They had an empire that covered several galaxies, and were very powerful, bureaucratic and methodical. They arrived on a planet and took over from within, strategically placing their moles in positions of power across the planet then, when the time was right . . .’

‘Invasion?’ asked the Brigadier.

The Doctor smiled ruefully. ‘Exactly. I knew that few of the aliens I’d ever come across before used the term “conglomerate”. That’s what the Jex call their power elite. But for the last two thousand years they’ve been in retreat, persecuted by one of their former slave-races.’

‘Why do they take over worlds?’ Lethbridge-Stewart demanded.

‘The usual reasons. Power. Profit motives. The Jex are from a planet with a slightly toxic atmosphere, hence their interest in Turlough.’ The Doctor turned and shrugged as the helicopter came into land at Los Angeles airport. ‘Brigadier, we really have to stop this race. They’re not as bloodthirsty as the Daleks or the Cybermen, but they’re chillingly effective.’

‘Worst case scenario?’

The Doctor paused and looked troubled. ‘If they get a foothold? I would say the complete subjugation of the human race within six months.’

Tegan’s night in the desert had, indeed, been one of the most uncomfortable she’d ever spent (even worse than the conditions she and Turlough had endured on Terminus). However, she, Milligan and Paynter hadn’t even tried to sleep. They couldn’t.

All they did was talk about the spacecraft that had buzzed them and try to describe it in every detail and from every angle. The colour of the lights, the shape of the shadow it cast. Everything.

Suddenly Tegan saw yet another side of Paynter. And of Milligan too. Professionals. Trained men with an astonishingly keen eye for anomalous detail. She had to admit it, she was impressed.

‘They’re like nothing I’ve come across before,’ noted Paynter. ‘The shape’s all wrong for a Cyber reconnaissance ship.’

The sun rose just after five and the chill of the night was soon swept away and replaced by an almost instantaneous and severe heat. They had over twenty miles to go to civilisation. It was a very unappealing thought.

They had walked for more than two hours as the sun climbed higher in the sky and stewed them in their own juices before the blisters finally began to take their toll. Particularly on Tegan who was eventually forced, much to her acute embarrassment, to ask Paynter and Milligan whether they could rest for a few moments.

The look she received from the captain was an intoxicating mixture of exasperation and delight that he had clearly won a bet with his sergeant. Milligan’s reaction, on the other hand, betrayed an obvious concern for Tegan but with perhaps a trace of disappointment that she had cost him some money.

‘But of course,’ Paynter said. ‘You must be tired. You’ve been on your mouth all day.’

Tegan said nothing. She merely sat down, removed her shoes and began to massage her feet, both of which resembled raw and bloodied cuts of meat. She tried desperately hard not to show how close to tears she was with the pain.

Milligan and Paynter, meanwhile, chatted away as if this was a Sunday afternoon stroll in Hyde Park.

‘I could do with a few bevvies right now,’ said Milligan, draining the last of the water from a hip flask he’d brought from the car. ‘Get into one of them Las Vegas casinos and put my wad on twenty-seven black.’

‘Next time you’re in London I’ll take you to my club.’ Paynter turned and shouted back to Tegan. ‘You can come too if you like. They allow women in on Thursdays.’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world,’ muttered Tegan.

‘They’ve got a Steinway in the lobby. I keep meaning to take lessons. I’ve always wanted to be able to play.’

‘Remarkable,’ Tegan noted. ‘You’re the first man I’ve ever met with pianist envy.’

Milligan began to laugh, then stopped when he saw the dark look on his superior’s face. ‘So, what do you think about her then?’ he asked philosophically as they turned away from Tegan and walked out of earshot.

‘Strange girl,’ said Paynter.

‘I like her,’ replied Milligan. ‘She’s got spunk.’

‘Yeah, but she’s an Australian,’ noted Paynter, as if that was a crime in itself. ‘London bars are full of them. Big mouths and smelly shoes.’

‘You serious?’

‘Nah, just pulling your tiddler. She’s all right, I suppose.’ Paynter stopped and scanned the horizon for signs of life. He removed his binoculars from the pocket of his sleeveless flak jacket and repeated the process. ‘This isn’t good.’ he said. ‘We’re not making much progress. We need to get to a phone as quickly as possible and let HQ know what’s happened.’

‘The ship?’

‘You don’t think it’s significant?’ asked Paynter incredulously.

‘Could have been a coincidence,’ noted Milligan. ‘You said yourself, this is a bug hot spot.’

‘Balls!’ replied Captain Paynter. ‘That was for the tourist back there. That ship was the real thing. A hunter, bird of prey, whatever it is they’re calling attack fighters on Uranus or wherever the hell these things come from. And it was targeting us. Why do you think the car lost power?’

The full implications of what Paynter was saying hit Milligan right between the eyes. ‘You’re really giving me the willies,’ he said. ‘On several levels.’

‘They’ll be back. For us.’

‘Then hadn’t we better get a move on?’ asked Milligan.

Paynter seemed relieved that the penny had finally dropped. ‘Indeed,’ he said eagerly. ‘Only we’ve had to stop because Waltzing Matilda’s got sore plates of meat, you know what I’m saying?!’

Milligan nodded. 'I'll give her a hand, skipper, but give the lass a chance. She is a civilian.'

'She reckons she's had more experience of EBEs than you and me put together son,' said Paynter. 'Tell her to get her knickers on and let's get on the move, sharpish.'

A mile down the road a seemingly deserted garage emerged out of the heat haze and the dust. Milligan turned to the limping Tegan with a relieved expression.

'See. It's not all sand and buzzards. They have other things in Nevada!'

From a distance, however, Paynter was being cautious. 'It looks like something out of *Deliverance*,' he said caustically. 'If there's anybody there let me do the talking.'

'*Achtung!*' said Tegan with a little Nazi salute that seemed to rub Paynter up in just the desired fashion.

'Hello,' he called out as they approached the garage.

There was no reply.

'The pay phone's probably round the back,' Milligan said.

'Stay here and keep your eyes open,' Paynter told his colleague as he headed off around the bare concrete walls of the garage.

'Do you reckon they have a ladies room?' asked Tegan.

'That'll be round the back too, like as not.'

Tegan nodded and mouthed a barely audible 'Thank you' before scuttling off in the direction that Paynter had gone.

David Milligan stood alone in the baking sun for a moment before a voice from the darkness of the garage made him jump.

'Need any help, boy?'

The man emerged from the shadows, his eyes covered by thick-rimmed mirror shades. 'I'm afraid we had a breakdown some miles back,' replied Milligan.

The man spat on the ground and moved into the light, the sun instantly reflecting off the shades and temporarily blinding Milligan. 'You English?' he asked casually in a poison-tipped Deep South accent.

Milligan smiled at him. 'Our car ...' he paused, wondering how best to describe a flying saucer attack. 'Conked out,' he said at last.

'They do that,' the man told him, moving towards the nearest petrol pump. He bent over to retrieve something from behind it and turned with a sickly, yellow-toothed grin. 'Especially when they're interfered with by extraterrestrial surveillance craft, yeah?'

Milligan nodded. Then again, he would have nodded if he'd been asked whether he agreed that black was white. It was the barrel of the lethal-looking shotgun in the man's hands that made him so persuasive.

'Listen,' he said brightly, raising both of his hands. 'There really is nothing to get upset about. We're just passing though.'

There was a sinister twitch in the man's expression, as though Milligan had just said something desperately amusing. 'On the ground,' he ordered.

Milligan slowly lowered himself on to one knee, still holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. 'I really don't think you want to be doing this,' he said calmly. 'I'm no threat to you. None of us are. We just want to get home.'

'That's where you're wrong,' said the man. 'You don't know how much of a threat you are.'

The rest room was dark and cool and stank of bleach and stale urine. Tegan almost gagged. She was happy to be out of the sun, but as soon as she had splashed some water from the filthy washbasin on to her face and looked at her sunburn in the cracked and stained mirror, she decided she'd had enough hospitality. She turned and walked back through the door, blinking, into the brilliant sunlight. A little further along the wall, Paynter was on the pay phone, telling someone in UNIT headquarters about their experiences with the UFO, and their position, in cold, clinical, almost dispassionate bursts. After a moment, as Tegan watched him from the shade of the building, he replaced the receiver and gave her a confident little smile.

'Help is on its way,' he said.

Tegan nodded. 'Good,' she said, rubbing the peeling skin on her forehead.

'You suffering?' asked Paynter without any apparent trace of sympathy.

She scowled at him with barely concealed contempt. 'Just a bit,' she said at last. 'I'm sure you're delighted to . . .'

Her outrage was cut short, however, by the sound of the shot from around the corner. Tegan screamed and then instantly felt ashamed of herself. A concerned expression crossed Paynter's face as he reached into his pocket and removed his Browning. 'Stay there,' he ordered, but Tegan ignored him and followed him to the corner of the garage.

There, on the baked-dirt forecourt, was Milligan's body, face down in a pool of his own blood.

'Head shot,' Paynter whispered, flattening himself against the garage wall and pulling Tegan with him. 'Shit, I shouldn't have left him.'

Tegan stole a glance past his shoulder. To her surprise she felt nothing. A hollow numbness.

'Pull yourself together,' hissed Paynter, regardless of whether she had done anything to warrant such a rebuke or not. 'You can't help him now.'

'No,' answered Tegan automatically. 'That's the story of my life.'

They faced each other and for a fraction of a second there was eye contact, and a shared pain. Then it passed and Paynter risked putting his head around the corner. A shotgun blast narrowly missed him and sent him sprawling to the ground, out of sight of the gunman. 'Stupid idiot,' Paynter said in self-flagellation. 'One target. Double-barrelled shotgun. He's got himself a sniper's nest behind the middle petrol pump. I can draw his fire but we'll need ...'

Then he stopped as if he had only just realised that it wasn't Barrington at his shoulder, but an unarmed Australian girl. 'Never mind.'

'What's Plan B?' Tegan asked.

'Gimme a few minutes and I'll tell you,' muttered Paynter.

Tegan pulled a small mirror from her skirt pocket and handed it to Paynter. 'Any use?' she asked.

Paynter looked at her in surprise. 'This hardly seems like the time to ask, but ...'

'I always carry one,' answered Tegan. 'Helps with the application of make-up, don't you know?'

Paynter held the mirror out in front of him and adjusted the angle until he had the garage owner in sight. 'He's got a clear line of fire this side,' he noted, 'and we can't go round the back because he's at an angle where he'd see any movement to his right.'

'So?' asked Tegan anxiously.

Paynter withdrew the mirror and handed it back to Tegan. 'No transport, so he must have been dropped in. I'm not generally a cynical man,' he began, clearly lying, 'but matey out there is a rank amateur. And I'm *not*.' He removed his jacket and bundled it into Tegan's arms. 'I'm going up on the roof to teach this redneck a lesson he won't forget for the rest of his short life. Stay here and don't move unless you want to be hamburger.'

Tegan didn't see any point in arguing. She watched as Paynter clambered up the external drainpipe beside the rest rooms and flattened himself on the asphalt roof. She used the mirror to track him crawling across it as far as she could, then turned her attention to the man with the shotgun. He had advanced beyond the gas pump and was slowly making his way towards an abandoned car three-quarters of the way to the corner. Tegan offered up a silent prayer to the God she had stopped believing in when she was nine that he wouldn't turn around and look skywards.

The two rapid shots that shattered the man's kneecaps from behind told her that Paynter's plan had swung, effectively, into operation. Tegan saw the reflection of an ill-defined shape sweep through the mirror's field of vision. Paynter, if that was indeed who it was, became blurred by the vibration of her hand which, she suddenly realised, was shaking.

She pocketed the mirror and placed the palms of her hands flat against the bare concrete wall trying to control her breathing. Then she put them over her ears to cut out the tortured screams that were coming from around the corner.

Hands are useful things, she decided, when they can be used to obliterate the outside world. Even gunshots.

‘Tegan.’ Paynter’s voice sliced through the noise of her pounding heart. He shouted her name again and she emerged from the shadows, blinking, into the sunlight. Paynter met her halfway and placed himself between the body of the man and her.

‘Best not to look, love,’ he said.

Tegan, frankly, believed him.

Instead, she turned and looked at Dave Milligan, dead on a Nevada dirt road many miles from home. Tegan had seen death come in many shades, colours and flavours, on many worlds and in many times. But this one hurt.

‘We can grieve later,’ said Paynter, holding her at arm’s length. ‘I’m hurting too, but we have to get away from here. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ she said, forcing herself to stop any self-indulgent waterworks before they had a chance to start.

‘Good girl.’ Paynter looked back at the dead man. ‘I got some information from him before I killed him, and I didn’t like the sound of it.’

‘What information?’ asked Tegan.

‘They’ve sent a pair of assassins after us, and they’ll be here any minute.’

He took Tegan’s hand and set off at a trot towards the desert, dragging the unhappy girl with him.

The Griffith Observatory stood liked a domed spacecraft in the shadow of the Hollywood hills. Newton leaned on the railings behind the planetarium looking up at the vast white sign above the snaking path of Blue Jay Way. In one of the houses directly beneath on the gigantic O, a party appeared to be taking place.

At seven a.m.

Only in LA!

When he had first arrived in this city he had been taken in by the plasticity, the fake warmth and crass commercialism – a bit of fairy dust that some celestial capitalist had sprinkled on the town. He loved to get up into the hills in Bel Air, real Charles Manson country, and just sit in his car watching the amorphous globule of humanity beneath him coming and going. Living and dying.

He had plans for this place. Big plans.

Then the aliens got themselves involved in his sordid world and now he felt like a gatecrasher at his own party.

When Nostradamus had predicted that, “to the great Empire shall come another, distant and being light and goodness, the Kingdom shall fall in great despair”, Newton knew (really knew) that he was talking about this time and this place.

‘What are you thinking about?’ asked Ryman.

‘Jesus!’ shouted Newton, turning sharply. ‘I nearly crapped myself.’

Ryman looked uninterested in such detail. ‘You’re punctual,’ he noted.

‘And that, in itself, was difficult enough. Why do you want to meet at this godforsaken hour?’ asked Newton.

‘It seemed appropriate,’ Ryman answered, joining him at the railing and looking at the Hollywood sign. ‘A new dawn is coming, figuratively as well as literally.’

Newton considered this. ‘Why here, specifically?’

‘It’s as good a place as any,’ noted Ryman. ‘And besides, there’s something I wanted to show you. Come with me.’

They crossed the car park towards the observatory and paused beside the hexagonal monolith celebrating the achievements of the great astronomers. Copernicus, Galileo. Kepler, Herschel. ‘Your namesake,’ Ryman said, pointing to the figure and face that depicted Isaac Newton.

‘My ancestor actually,’ said Newton proudly. ‘We’re very big on family history.’

Ryman began to laugh.

‘What’s so amusing?’

‘Just a passing thought,’ Ryman said. ‘It occurs to me that humanity is very big on family history, but not too interested in what goes on outside the family.’

Newton turned with a quizzical look on his face. ‘I don’t follow?’

‘Yes you do. You all do,’ said Ryman with a chuckle. ‘Everything the human race believes it knows about the universe, it only knows because my family, my race allows it to.’

The aliens. Again Newton felt shaken. The same as he had that first day when he had been given his revelation: everything you know is *wrong*.

‘I should like to know more about your race,’ he said at long last. This wasn’t the first time he had said so.

But, as previously, Ryman seemed amused. ‘Why?’ he asked.

Newton searched hard for an answer that would coax Ryman into conversation, but would also satisfy his own inner conflict. ‘We have a saying in England,’ he said. “‘If you want to defeat your enemy you must first sing his song.’”

‘Enemy?’ Ryman was curious now, Newton could tell that.

‘You tell me.’

So Ryman did.

‘We’re from the Pleiades system,’ he began, a distant look in his eyes. ‘Somewhere, sort of . . .’ he pointed vaguely to the right of the sky. ‘Over there. Nice place, you should visit us sometime.’

Newton didn’t seem to share Ryman’s enthusiasm for the alien homeworld. ‘What’s it called?’

‘In our native tongue?’ asked Ryman. ‘*Fen’vetch Suxa Canavitch*. It means “the beautiful world of blue and gold”. It loses a lot in translation.’

‘And humanity?’

There was a long pause as Ryman looked into the distant clear blue sky as though he were a lost traveller searching for a recognisable reference point that would lead him to his home. ‘Before your puny race crawled from the primordial slime and achieved awareness,’ he said with a bitter anger, ‘we had an empire that covered seven galaxies.’

The pair walked to the observatory and climbed up to the giant telescope. Newton looked out across Los Angeles, tracing the path of the ruler-straight freeways all the way to the ocean on the shimmering, early morning horizon.

The city was coming alive like a giant beast after slumber. For a moment, and for no explicable reason, Newton was terrified. What was worse, he was unsure about what he was most afraid of. The aliens with whom he worked, or the idea of the power that was within his grasp.

‘They have no idea what’s coming, have they?’ he asked, wistfully.

‘Somebody said something similar to me only a few days ago,’ Ryman noted as he fiddled with the controls of the space telescope. ‘Of course, the irony there was that whilst humanity has little idea of the war that is to come, the Jex have even less. Though that may be about to change from what I understand.’

Newton thought *he* understood. ‘War in heaven?’ he asked.

‘An interesting way of putting it. War in hell might be a closer analogy.’ Ryman turned the telescope towards the patch of sky he had indicated earlier. ‘Somewhere out there a thousand Canavitchi craft, containing a million warriors, are poised. Waiting for one word from me.’

‘What word?’

“Attack”,’ said Ryman simply and took his eyes away from the lens. ‘You know, the funny thing about humanity is that they’ve never even suspected. On other worlds we’ve had a presence for far less time and they’ve known that somebody was interfering with their planet’s development, even if they haven’t known who exactly. But you . . .’ He began to laugh again. ‘We’ve been on Earth for nearly a thousand years, waiting for the warriors to come. And you never even knew.’

Curiosity got the better of Newton. 'What do you mean?'

Ryman sat down on the wall outside the telescope tower. 'Messing with your minds.'

'I don't believe you,' said Newton strongly. 'You're a liar.'

'Not at all,' replied Ryman.

Newton began to walk away from the alien. 'I don't want to hear this,' he said.

'I'm sure you don't,' noted Ryman. 'Which kind of proves my point. Humans never want to see or hear the obvious. We faked the Turin Shroud,' he continued. 'That was my idea. A good one, don't you think? We'd watched the Crusades and set up the Knights Templar. We'd seen how much you guys were into your ridiculous religions. We gave the Spanish Inquisition all sorts of strange ideas about how flat the Earth was.'

An appalled look crossed Newton's face. 'Satan is Lord of Lies,' he said, horrified. 'I've been used by the devil himself.'

'Whatever!' said Ryman. 'It wasn't just religion, you know? We've got more talent than that. The War of Independence, that was us. The Wall Street Crash. That was most definitely us! We've managed to slow down your scientific evolution to a piss in the wind. If it wasn't for us, you'd have achieved interstellar travel by the 1850s. You name any man who's been out of time in any field in the thousands of years of your pathetic planet's history and I'll show you somebody that a Canavitchi sent on a detour!'

'Lies!'

Ryman was clearly enjoying himself. 'We put obstacles in the way of Babbage so the difference engine was never built. We burned the instructions for how to build a pyramid in six easy stages.'

'But Nostradamus says . . .'

Ryman roared with laughter. 'We helped Nostradamus *write* his prophecies,' he said with a cynical smirk on his face. 'So it's only natural that we would have a vested interest in making sure that they come true, isn't it? Mind you, if you're talking about real Canavitchi prophets, I preferred Elvis myself, thank you very much.'

Even though everything Newton had ever believed in (which wasn't much, if truth be told) had just been smashed before his eyes, a question still managed to make its way through the swirling maelstrom of thoughts in his mind. 'But what do you *want* with Earth?' he asked.

Ryman's reply was chillingly simple. 'Want? Want? We want to destroy it.'

Chapter Sixteen

Naked Eye

It was an old wooden construction. A rickety timber shack built by desert settlers who had got left behind on the way to the Californian gold rush.

Tegan collapsed on the floor, panting for breaths that came in short, painful bursts.

Paynter, after checking the grimy window, sat down heavily next to her and began to load his gun.

‘Nine bullets left,’ he said. ‘It’s not going to be enough.’

Tegan sat up and coughed through the dust that coated her throat. ‘There’s optimism for you.’

Paynter gave her a withering look. ‘May I remind you what the man at the garage said before he died . . .’

‘You mean before you killed him?’

‘If you prefer,’ Paynter agreed. ‘They’ve called in the heavy mob.’

‘I don’t understand,’ admitted Tegan. ‘As usual.’

Again Geoff Paynter suppressed the urge to scream obscenities. ‘That murdering scumbag told me that he was a freelance assassin, hired by “some guy called Steve”. He also said that there is another team in the area, and they are still out there.’

‘Do you know who they are?’ asked Tegan.

‘Oh yes,’ announced Paynter. ‘And it’s not good. They’re a pair of memorably dodgy hypocritical gangsters. A big ugly git called Perico, full of his own self-importance. He’s dangerous. The other one’s called Heldos, a nasty little gnome. Supposedly the brains of the organisation, but in reality he’s just a wannabe.’

Tegan was impressed. ‘You’ve met them before?’

‘Twice,’ said Paynter with a touch of pride. ‘In Helsinki when I put a bullet in Heldos’s leg. Another time in Hull of all places. Perico seems to believe he owes me one because last time I biffed him in the conk, didn’t I? They’re nowhere near as good as they think they are, but they’ve got a reasonable hit record. If it was me and Mark against them, two on two, I wouldn’t be sweating, let’s put it that way.’

‘But,’ noted Tegan. ‘Unfortunately . . .’

Paynter looked at her closely. She was tired and frightened. 'No sense in moaning about it,' he said at last. 'If you're going to die, a shack in the middle of a desert is as good a place as any.'

'This is hopeless,' said Tegan angrily. 'I'm sick of being chased from pillar to post.'

Paynter muttered something about it hardly being a barrel of laughs for him either, and Tegan's fragile grip on her temper was finally lost. 'What's that supposed to mean?' she exploded.

'Well,' began Paynter slowly, 'I suppose, from their point of view, you know, the more narcissistic superficial bimbos they can kill, the better. Just looking at it from the other side of the coin you understand . . . ?'

'That's preferable, I'd have said, to being an intellectual dwarf with the social graces of a mollusc.'

Paynter began to laugh. Then he stopped. '*Soy un perdidor*. I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?'

Tegan stamped her foot, much to Paynter's obvious amusement. He was winning the argument through humour and she wasn't enjoying the experience of being patronised and outwitted by this . . .

'Coward,' she continued. 'When your friend was in the burning car the Brigadier said you should have seen your face. "Mr crap himself and run a mile."'

She was lying, of course. The Brigadier would never have said that, or anything like it. And she regretted it almost as soon as she'd said it. Tegan Jovanka was a lot of things and she would freely admit to most of them. But she wasn't anything like the spiteful nasty girl who was operating her mouth right now.

For the first time Paynter became really angry. His face reddened and his eyes narrowed. 'I ought to spark your lights out,' he threatened.

'Is that what you do for fun?' asked Tegan sarcastically. It was too late to stop now.

Paynter resisted an overwhelming urge to put her over his knee. 'Lesbian,' he suggested turning away from her and bringing (what he hoped would be) an end to the conversation.

Tegan ignored him. For a moment. Then she said, 'You're a moron.'

'Listen you stupid bint,' replied Paynter, frothing with rage. 'I'm the moron that's keeping you alive right now. If you don't like it then you can leave any time you want. Now sit down and shut up. And whilst you're about it . . . Smoke my cornet, big arse!'

'My bottom is *not* fat!' cried Tegan. 'That's a terrible thing to say. You're an awful man. I hate you.'

'Mutual,' replied Paynter.

Tegan slapped his face. Hard.

The whizzing, zipping impact-sound ricocheted around the tiny shack.

Paynter responded in kind, a vicious backhander across the left-hand side of Tegan's face. Her mouth hung limply open for several seconds. She raised her hand to slap him again, in response, but Paynter caught her arm in midair and held on to it firmly whilst she winced with pain.

They stared at each other, a shared hatred in their eyes.

And then, for some reason, they started kissing.

When the sun rose to a certain point, its reflection cast a fractured cascade of mutated light across the lake in front of the InterCom ranch house, turning the surface of the water to every colour of the spectrum. Sanger and Giresse stood on a wooden jetty, wearing dark glasses and staring deeply and intently at the shades that the curious effect of nature was producing.

For almost an hour they watched, motionless and silent, scarcely even breathing. Then, simultaneously, they came out of their trance and turned to walk back to the house and resume their conference.

'This girl?' Giresse asked as they approached a group of their colleagues standing by the entrance to the house.

'Kyla?' asked Sanger.

Giresse nodded. 'I'm concerned.'

For once, Sanger's façade of quiet consideration dropped a fraction of an inch. Giresse saw a weary and irritable expression as his face betrayed him.

Betrayal, it seemed, was all around.

'If she was Canavitchi ...' Giresse began when Sanger's continued silence threatened to bring an end to the conversation before it had properly begun.

'Then, they are closer to the heart of the organisation than we had previously thought,' reasoned Sanger.

'Exactly.' Giresse signalled to the men to return to the ranch house ahead of them. He looked at Sanger gravely, and grasped his colleague by the shoulders, spinning him round.

'We knew they would come eventually,' he urged.

'That is true,' admitted Sanger, shaking himself free of Giresse's grasp. Again, there was a dismissive quality to what he was saying that both annoyed and terrified the Frenchman.

Giresse's voice dropped to a whisper. 'But you know what this really means?' he asked.

'Of course,' replied Sanger. 'If the Canavitchi are here and they've infiltrated our organisation in one sphere, then they'll almost certainly have made inroads elsewhere. There may even be a traitor in the conglomerate.'

* * *

‘Where the hell did *that* come from?’

Tegan was just as perplexed as Paynter.

‘Temporary madness brought on by claustrophobia?’ she asked. ‘I *am* claustrophobic . . . I’m not sure whether I’ve mentioned it before?’

Paynter seemed satisfied with this explanation, then added one of his own. ‘Pressure of combat,’ he said helpfully. ‘I’ve seen similar things.’

‘But . . .’ Tegan was horrified. ‘We *kissed!*’

There was something about the way in which she said it that seemed to equate the deed with drinking water from a lavatory. Paynter felt himself getting angry again. ‘It wasn’t *that* bad, surely?’

Tegan could hardly believe that, at such a critical moment in both of their lives, Paynter was worried about whether she thought he was a decent kisser or not. ‘Bad?’ she yelled, angrily. ‘Bad? It was *brilliant!*’

Paynter, not for the first time, was extremely confused. ‘So what’s the problem?’

‘I hate you,’ Tegan said simply. ‘I loathe you and everything you stand for. That’s what’s worrying me.’

The distant noise of a gun bolt being dragged into position stopped the conversation at this intriguing point.

‘Hate to interrupt,’ whispered Paynter. ‘But we seem to have company.’

Control stood on the balcony of the penthouse suite on the top floor of the Bel Air Holiday Inn overlooking the 405 San Diego Freeway. Six perfect lanes of nose-to-tail traffic in each direction. The city beyond, Control reasoned, could have been almost anywhere. Paris, Tokyo, London . . .

Except for the freeway, which was wholly unique to a country where everything came in straight lines. From hypermarket aisles, to cinema queues, to cocaine.

Control hated Los Angeles with a passion. A town full of empty minds and empty hearts. He spent as little time here as possible, preferring San Francisco and New York. Cities with *soul*.

The only reason that he was here now – in this plastic-fantastic, neon, non-stick sink of human weakness, this modern-age Sodom – was that he was sleeping with the enemy.

Everybody did it in LA.

‘You’re also thinking this place is a craphole, yeah?’

There was a pseudo-innocent smile on Control’s face as he turned to face Ryman. ‘I wasn’t aware that the Canavitchi were telepathic,’ he said.

‘There’s a lot of things you don’t know about us,’ Ryman replied. There was a chilling edge to the statement. ‘Empathic ability being one of them.’

Control, however, was unmoved by any implied threats. When he looked at Ryman it was, almost impossibly, the alien who was the more unnerved by their eye contact and quickly turned away.

'The information that your brave girl provided us with has proved to be most useful,' began Control.

Ryman expected nothing less, and interrupted to say so.

'It would be arrogant to assume that the CIA does not appreciate her sacrifice,' Control continued.

'And the rest of humanity?' asked Ryman.

Now Control found humour in the conversation. 'Do you ever have that feeling that people don't understand or appreciate what it is that you're doing for them? For their own good?'

'Not often,' Ryman replied.

'I do,' said Control. 'Every single day.'

Ryman didn't seem interested in playing Control's games. Instead he picked up the copy of the CD disk that had wandered across a third of the globe in such an exciting and dangerous fashion. Looking at it, he seemed to find it remarkable that such a small and insignificant object could contain such powerful, world-altering data.

'The information that your colleague was able to supply has put us in such a position as to be able to accurately predict what the next move of the Jex will be,' announced Control.

'Prediction is the name of the game,' noted Ryman. 'And now you're giving the information to us?' He pocketed the disk, then asked Control the most obvious question in the world. 'Why?'

If Control was surprised by the query he didn't show it. 'Mutual interests,' he replied simply, before adding, 'I must say, however, that the CIA were saddened to learn of the death of your colleague. A senseless waste of life.'

Ryman, in his turn, was surprised – by this display of sympathy. 'My people have little time for human sentimentalities such as this,' he said curtly. 'The period of life is merely one tiny portion of an eternity of states. We shed no tears for the nonliving though they may, in their own way, cry an ocean for us.'

Control picked up his overcoat from the chair on which it rested and gave the Los Angeles skyline a final, lingering look. 'You don't fear death?' he asked, curiously. 'You must find that quite useful during conflict.'

'Absolutely,' noted Ryman. 'Death, for us, is merely a doorway to a better state of existence. Why should that be feared? We welcome death.' He took Control's place on the panoramic balcony. 'Stay awhile,' he called over his shoulder. 'Something's going to happen in a few moments that I think will greatly amuse you.'

* * *

Tegan crouched on one knee listening intently for the slightest sound from outside the shack. In her hands she clutched a two-foot-long piece of charred wood that Paynter had retrieved from the ashes of the derelict stove. It was the closest thing to a weapon that they could find for her. Across the gloomy, dusty room Tegan could see Paynter partially hidden behind an overturned table. He gave her a watery, encouraging smile. Tegan shuffled a few inches closer to the door in the grim light. Then, to her horror, the floorboard beneath her creaked loudly. She cursed and held her breath, imagining Paynter slapping himself on the forehead on the other side of the room.

The door burst open. Light flooded Tegan's world, and she found herself pressed against the wall of the shack as a multitude of gunshots exploded all around her.

The Doctor was sitting in his hotel room in Beverly Hills, deep in thought, when a cough alerted him to another presence.

'Any word on them?' he asked the Brigadier.

Lethbridge-Stewart, for once, found himself the bearer of good news. 'Yes, actually. Captain Paynter rang in around an hour ago. Seems they encountered a UFO in the desert late last evening and their car lost all power. We've sent a helicopter to pick them up.'

The immense relief in the room was tangible. Colour flooded back into the Doctor's pale cheeks.

'Thank you, Brigadier,' he said simply. He picked up a pair of half-moon spectacles from the bedside cabinet and put them on. Then he began to read from a three-page print-out that had been lying on the bed. "'The conglomerate operate in total autonomy to the Central League on Jexa. They have the authority to initiate any operations that they decide will maximise the ability of the Jex to successfully integrate themselves into the indigenous population and aid with invasion and conquest. The classic Jex invasion takes place in three stages. One: infiltration. Two: economic conquest. Three: bombardment . . ." And so it goes on.'

Lethbridge-Stewart took the proffered report and read it closely. 'Where did you get this?' he finally asked as he came towards the end of the final page.

'I accessed the TARDIS databanks from UNIT last night using your space-time telegraph for the file transfer,' admitted the Doctor. 'I wish I'd done so earlier, it might have saved us an awful lot of trouble, not to mention Mark Barrington's life. I'd have said we were heading towards the end of Stage Two now, wouldn't you agree?'

The Brigadier finished reading the report and handed it back to the Doctor. There was little he could add. 'We must do something,' he said simply.

‘I agree,’ replied the Doctor. ‘That’s why I’d like you to arrange a meeting between us and Sanger.’

‘When I said we must do something,’ Lethbridge-Stewart began cautiously, ‘suicide wasn’t the course of action I was thinking of.’

The Doctor shook his head quickly. ‘Brigadier, I’ve been blinded by my own inertia,’ he said. ‘I think it’s time we took the fight to them.’

‘But walking into the lion’s den?’ the Brigadier asked. ‘It’s insane.’

There was a quiet determination in the Doctor’s voice. ‘I’ve let things run away from me,’ he said softly. ‘I’ve been diverted by trivia and by people playing games with the lives of others. That stops now. When in doubt, attack the brain.’

Just as Tegan was beginning to think it couldn’t possibly get any worse, Paynter fired a rapid burst of four shots just above and to the left of her head, towards the opened door. Tegan was too startled even to scream. She merely stared mutely at Paynter until a figure slumped through the door and fell, dead, on the floor in front of her.

‘Small world,’ Paynter told the corpse.

She looked down at the man. A twisted hobgoblin, his limbs spread-eagled and his face turned to one side so that Tegan could look into his cold, dead eyes. The expression on his face was one of astonishment as though he had never, for one single second, believed that today would be the last day of his life. And there was something else visible. Betrayal.

Tegan was about to tell Paynter this when another burst of gunfire from somewhere close to her shattered the strange tranquillity that had descended on the shack. She covered her ears and crouched low, trying to make herself invisible in the shadows.

After a moment, there was silence again and she opened her eyes to find Paynter lying on one side, blood oozing from a wound at the top of his thigh. His face showed no pain, only disappointment that his gun had been flung two feet in front of him and out of his reach.

A chunky shadow crossed the floor, the gun and eventually Paynter himself. A man stood silhouetted in the doorway, stark against the desert sky outside.

‘All right, Geoff?’ said the North Country voice belonging to the shadow.

Paynter grinned, ruefully. ‘Niall,’ he replied, sociably. ‘Bloody terrible to see you again, you waste-of-space tosser. Nice day for a murder, yeah?’

The shadow touched Tegan’s outstretched foot and she slowly moved back and squatted, very still, in the shadows of the door.

Perico moved a fraction into the room. ‘Don’t move,’ he told Paynter, who obliged, albeit unwillingly.

'I'll lay odds your mate there wasn't expecting to be used as a human shield to get you inside,' noted Paynter with a hoarse rattle in his throat. It was amusement. 'I should have known you'd sell out anybody and anything to make a quick buck. That's your bottom line, isn't it?'

'Tell it to somebody who's interested,' said the man, taking another step forward. He was within touching distance of Tegan, but inched slowly straight past her and on towards Paynter who was slumped against the far wall. 'Principles are for the stupid. And the dead.'

Paynter's eyes never left the face of his nemesis, but there was a fraction of movement from his hand towards his discarded gun.

A shot thudded into the floor of the shack, inches from his fingers.

'No, no, no,' said Perico in amusement. He was playing with Paynter like a cat would play with a bird. 'So, lost any decent partners lately?'

There was no immediate answer. Instead Tegan saw, for the first time, that Paynter really had been badly hurt by the shot to his leg. Finally the grimace of pain left his face. 'Lost a better one than you did,' he said looking at the body of Heldos. 'Mind you, you always did get that stunted clown to do the really dirty jobs, didn't you? I wonder what the last thing going through his mind was when he realised that you'd just been using him all the time?'

There was no reply from the big man. Only a harsh exhalation of breath.

'Probably thinking what a great pal you were and how you'd never let him down, do you think?' continued Paynter, as Perico pointed his gun directly at the UNIT man's face.

'Anything else?' asked the assassin, just as a two-foot-long piece of wood crashed down on his skull from behind.

Perico stumbled on to one knee, his grip on his weapon loosened. A second blow caught him, savagely, on the fleshy part of the back of his neck, snapping the plank in two. The stunted remains dropped from Tegan's hands to the floor. Stunned, Perico spun towards the girl who now stood behind him, rooted to the spot. With jerky, automatic movements the big man pointed the gun in her direction.

Transfixed and staring death in the face, Tegan was vaguely aware of movement somewhere within the shack but she was glued to the floorboards. Perico's finger tightened on the trigger. Tegan opened her mouth to scream but found no sound emerging. Instead she closed her eyes and waited for the searing pain of the bullet that would kill her.

The shot blasted in her ears.

The office was cluttered and untidy, paper strewn everywhere. If Jon Newton had appreciated irony, he might have found some in the fact that Inter-

Com, the company that had largely replaced paper printing in the world, still seemed to be dependent upon it for their own operations.

But Newton was not, by nature, a man who celebrated the delicious ironies of life. Instead, he was a man who liked blowing things up.

‘Have you got the bomb?’ asked Hayley, rather pointlessly Newton thought.

‘No,’ he said and used irony for once in the way that it was intended. ‘I thought I’d leave it back at my gaff and bring a lemon sorbet instead.’

Hayley, her face, like Newton’s, covered by a black Balaclava, thought for several seconds. Then she pulled the terrorist headgear off, shook her hair and said, ‘Well, if you’re not going to take this seriously . . .’

Newton finally went ballistic. ‘Just watch the sodding door you stupid cow, and leave the thinking to me.’

Why, he wondered briefly, had he chosen to bring sludge-for-brains here along as his lookout? He could have chosen any of the coven . . . Well, actually, that was a point. Hayley was intellectually superior to the rest of the group.

Newton knelt beside the office desk, put his black canvas bag on the floor and carefully removed the detonation device. Laying it to one side, he took a roll of gaffer tape and began to fix four obese blocks of Semtex to the underside of the desk.

Next he produced a carrier bag full of assorted shrapnel and nails, and taped this over the explosive. As he fiddled with the wiring of the detonator he could hear Hayley behind him, humming something tuneless.

‘Shut up,’ he snapped.

Hayley muttered something about Newton being a pig and then resumed her watch.

‘Any movement . . .’ hissed Newton as he shoved the final wire into place.

‘Nothing,’ responded Hayley, without realising that it had been a command rather than a question. As she said it somewhere within the office complex, with an irony that neither of them would have appreciated, a klaxon sounded loudly. Newton juggled and almost dropped the bomb in his surprise. He gave Hayley an angry look as she turned, an equally startled expression on her face.

‘What did you touch?’ he demanded.

‘I didn’t touch anything,’ shouted the girl, panic dripping from every syllable. She turned and looked again through the office window.

‘We’re surrounded,’ she said. ‘Security’s everywhere.’

‘Shit,’ exclaimed Newton angrily. ‘We’ve been ratted out.’ He was half on his feet when he suddenly realised the danger they were both in. ‘Hayley,’ he shouted, ‘get the hell away from the . . .’

But there was no time, and the shot that smeared half Hayley Tonkin’s brains in a lurid red mosaic across the clean white walls of the office had been and gone before the word ‘window’ left his lips.

Newton looked down at her lifeless body. Outside, there were shouts, orders and commands. But he wasn't listening. They wanted a gun battle, a nice orderly opportunity for him not to be captured alive. Well, he'd give them that. But on his terms.

He kissed Hayley on her blood-splattered cheek and then crawled under the desk, got himself into a comfortable position in which to die, and detonated the bomb.

Several miles away, in the Holiday Inn penthouse, Ryman and Control watched as the Los Angeles late afternoon skyline flashed yellow, orange, then red. A plume of smoke and fire was clearly visible from the Hollywood area. The sky seemed to be ablaze.

'I believe that was another piece of the jigsaw biting the dust,' said Ryman with a sinister chuckle as he handed Control his overcoat.

Control was aware that he was being dismissed from Ryman's presence. It was the kind of insulting stunt that he himself would often use on his CIA minions. A wave of revulsion and anger swept through him and he snatched his coat, wordlessly, from Ryman's hands and headed for the door.

'I told you it would be worth your while,' Ryman said, his face just visible in the half-light of the burning sky. Then he seemed to lose all interest in Control and turned his attention back to his little masterpiece of performance theatre in the distance. Already the air was full of the sound of police, fire and ambulance sirens and the searchlights of news helicopters buzzing over the bombed office building like flies around a rotting carcass.

Control closed the penthouse door and headed for the elevator, a sick feeling in his stomach at the way in which he had been used by this creature. He opened his mobile phone and called Greaves who was waiting in the car park beneath.

'I'll be down in a moment,' he said, a bad taste still in his mouth. 'Let's get the hell out of this city.'

The pain never came. Instead Tegan slowly opened her eyes to find Perico crumpled dead at her feet, on top of the body of his partner. Behind him stood Paynter, his gun still smoking, his leg still gushing blood. Neither said anything for what seemed like an eternity until Paynter dropped the gun, crouched and clamped both hands around his wound.

'I think I'm going to be sick,' he said.

And he was.

Still Tegan said nothing. She was looking at her hands, bloodied and lacerated from the force of the two blows she had brought crashing down on Perico's big ugly head.

'I've hurt my hands,' she said, feeling stupid and yet entirely vindicated by the sight of her own blood. 'Look,' she continued, holding out her hands for Paynter to inspect.

He raised his head, and wiped the sour spittle from his lips.

'Tegan ...' he began.

'Look at my hands,' wailed Tegan. 'Look at them. They're all cut and bruised ...' Then she began to cry. Hysterically at first, until Paynter limped over to her and held her to his chest, then more quietly, sobs of shock and disgust.

'Let it come,' said Paynter, his own pain mostly forgotten. 'It's all over now.' But it wasn't. For Tegan Jovanka it would never be all over.

Control reached the car park without any of the incidents that he half-expected in the hotel elevator. He had imagined all manner of James-Bond-style means of dispatch including nerve gas coming through the vents and the bottom of the elevator simply disappearing from beneath his feet.

Neither happened.

Instead, he stepped out and found Greaves waiting for him with a bemused look on his face.

'So what was all of that about?' asked Greaves. 'You look like hell.'

Control could barely speak as he sat in the car and shut his eyes against the harsh glare of the freeway while the car moved slowly out on to the 405.

'That,' he said evenly, 'was a meeting with the aliens.'

'Which ones?' Greaves asked cautiously.

Control found himself unable to answer for a long time. Instead, he was rehearsing in his own mind a way of explaining the sheer bloodcurdling terror he had felt when he had seen Ryman and the Canavitchi for what they really were.

'The most dangerous ones of all,' he said at last.

Greaves digested this information. 'So, what do we do now?'

'We wait,' replied Control. 'Until UNIT work out all the plots and subplots and come looking for our help.'

'And do we give it to them?' Greaves asked.

For once, Control didn't reply to one of Greaves's more stupid questions with amusement. It was time to get serious.

'Damn right we do,' he said quickly. 'We give them everything we've got.'

Part three

O, King of Chaos!

'The London men numbering thirty shall secretly conspire against the King. They shall make their plots upon a bridge. Their satellites shall taste of death.'

An extremely bad translation of 'Century IV.89' from *The True Prophecies or Prognostications of Michael Nostradamus* first translated by Theophilus de Garencieres (1672).

Chapter Seventeen

Submission

Turlough emerged from the long dark tunnel of sleep into the harsh and naked light of day and fell the final few feet to the bedroom floor with a muffled thud.

‘That was the worst day of my life,’ he muttered as his eyes flickered open and his senses were rudely assaulted.

The first thing his vision allowed him to focus upon was the carpet. Again.

Through a high window on the opposite wall, a disgruntled sun was giving off its light with all the enthusiasm of a turkey in the weeks leading tip to Christmas.

Turlough tried to move but something hard and strong was holding him in place. Turning his head, he found that his left hand and both of his feet were manacled to a short length of chain attached to a nearby radiator.

For a long time he simply lay where he was, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did, so he eventually pulled himself upright and sat, uncomfortably, with his back to the still-warm radiator. And it was then that he began to find out about the plot in which he had become an unwilling pawn.

Snatches of conversation from the next room floated through to him between long periods of brooding silence.

The instant he heard the word ‘Jex’, however, he knew exactly what they wanted him for.

Sometime early in the evening Eva came into the small room where he was chained tip and sat on a chair opposite him. She crossed her long legs, provocatively, and smiled at Turlough’s obvious discomfort.

‘Hello little man,’ she said. ‘Back in the land of the living, I see?’

Turlough didn’t feel like indulging in casual conversation. ‘I imagine you’ll have taken what you wanted from me by now?’ he asked sullenly. ‘That’s presumably why you’re no longer torturing me in that padded cell you’ve got behind your bedroom?’

‘And what might that be?’

‘My DNA,’ Turlough replied, wiping the amused smile from Eva’s face. ‘I know who you are, and I know what you want from me.’

Turlough one, Intergalactic Sadists nil. Extra time being played.

Eva stood and crossed the room, towering over Turlough, the sharp points of her 'I'm dead hard, me' shoes digging into his shins. 'That sounds like knowledge that should be shared,' she said and kicked him viciously in the ribs.

Turlough winced, but grinned back at her in futile defiance. 'Knowledge is power, right? The Jex are all dying, everybody from here to Andromeda knows that. You want to make Earth your new home and repopulate the planet. Nice plan but, I've got to tell you, it's been tried before and it's failed miserably every single time. Just a wild stab in the dark by the way ...'

The woman knelt beside Turlough and ran her fingers down his cheek, made rough to the touch by the five-day growth of stubble. 'Go on,' she whispered.

'I'm not your plaything you know,' Turlough announced angrily. 'You don't just wind me up and set me going.'

'Go on,' repeated Eva as she dug her fingernails into the flesh of Turlough's arms. 'Or I shall have to punish you.'

This amused Turlough. 'I bet you'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?' he asked. Then he answered her with almost chilling accuracy. 'You want to repopulate Earth, but to do this you'll have to change the planet's physical make-up because it's wet and it's cold and it makes breathing difficult for anybody without the necessary lungs. And believe me, I know that better than most. You should try playing rugby in the middle of January, ankle deep in snow in just a pair of shorts. That'd teach you a thing or two about torture techniques.'

The woman was obviously surprised that Turlough had learned so much about the project. Her hand moved to Turlough's scarred torso, where strips of his flesh had been peeled from his chest during the early stages of the experimentation. 'You must understand,' she began, 'that I was an unwilling party to what was done to you. I would have been perfectly happy if they had just disintegrated you and taken your DNA that way. Would have been so much simpler for all concerned. And much less painful.'

'I'm sure,' agreed Turlough sarcastically. 'But then, you wouldn't know how much I knew. Or the Doctor. Or UNIT. Would you? Well we know everything,' he announced grandly. 'We know that you're using the plutonium to make bombs that you're going to explode in the atmosphere. That will set off a chain reaction that will create an irradiated world with a much higher atmospheric pressure and temperature, more conducive to your needs. How am I doing so far?'

'Very well,' Eva said, heading for the door. 'You're a clever little boy, aren't you?'

Turlough glowed with pride, as if he had just been awarded first prize in some pointless athletic competition. 'But of course you need to keep some humans alive to work as, let's say, a slave labour force ...'

‘Such an ugly term, I feel. We prefer to think of those lucky survivors as helping the greater Jex cause.’

Turlough tried to pull away from the radiator but the chains held him firmly to it. ‘Humanity will not allow you to enslave it,’ he said, slumping back. ‘They’d sooner be destroyed than live in bondage to you or anyone else.’

‘If given such a choice,’ Eva said as she left the room, adding, ‘which they won’t be.’

The Doctor had come, unsurprisingly, to the same conclusion. ‘The Jex seem to have hit upon a novel solution to their need for higher resistance to heat,’ he told the Brigadier as they sped in a UNIT car through rush-hour traffic towards headquarters.

‘Outrageous,’ blustered Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘Alien Johnnies messing about with humanity’s genetic make-up? It’s unheard of.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ the Doctor said mirthlessly. ‘Spreading alien DNA such as Turlough’s via something like a gene-bomb would cause a genetic mutation in humans and give them a tolerance to higher temperatures. Not to mention other, rather nasty side effects such as birth defects in any offspring.’

Lethbridge-Stewart was appalled. ‘This is outrageous,’ he said, angrily. ‘We simply cannot let this happen.’

‘No Brigadier,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘We can’t.’

They say bad news travels fast and that was certainly true for the Sons of Nostradamus. Within twenty minutes of the bomb explosion a shocked Bill Quay and Sam Danvers were sitting in a virtually empty Denny’s Restaurant in North Hollywood being told the dreadful details by Nigel.

‘It was awful,’ said the young Englishman, numbed by the early stages of shock. ‘I wanted to go in there and see for myself, but I couldn’t, the place was overrun with cops. Some bastard ratted us out.’

Bill and Sam sat trying to digest this for an agonisingly long time.

Their leader was gone.

‘And you reckon Jon set off the bomb himself?’ asked Sam.

Nigel started to say something. Stopped. Looked at his coffee for a few seconds whilst his stomach performed extravagant gymnastic feats. Then he stood up and straightened his T-shirt. ‘Excuse me,’ he said as he turned and ran towards the bathroom, both hands clutched to his mouth.

Again, neither Sam nor Bill found themselves able to say anything until Nigel returned several moments later, dabbing the corner of his mouth with a wet paper towel. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said rather pathetically. ‘It’s just the thought of what it would have been like, you know to ...’ He stopped, and for the second time seemed ready to turn and run and vomit.

'Try not to think about it,' said Bill, though in reality he himself could think of little else, and was feeling more than a little sick. He had never previously thought for an instant about the consequences of their actions; of the victims of the bombs they planted being anything other than meat on a butcher's slab. They were the enemy and the enemy's job was to die in bomb blasts. But now the bodies were known to him. And the taste in his mouth was different.

It was the taste of fear.

'What are we going to do?' he asked no one in particular.

'I'm getting out of this city,' said Nigel, standing up. 'Prophecies or no prophecies, hanging around here has suddenly got much less attractive.'

'But we have to work out what to do next,' Sam said.

'Next?' Nigel asked incredulously. 'Listen, man, Jon's dead. Hayley's dead. The shit's about to hit the fan, big-style. Every cop and soldier in southern California's going to have us at the top of The List. You lot can go back to playing the Black Anoraks game if you want. I'm going. Bye.'

After he had gone Bill and Sam continued to stare into their coffee. Finally Sam looked up at his tired friend. 'We'd better get the coven together,' he said. 'Hard times are coming. We should be ready for them.'

Alone in the penthouse suite of the Holiday Inn, Shaun Ryman moved to the mirror that dominated one wall and pulled at the skin beneath one of his eyes with two fingers. With the surface taut and stretched, he moved in with a pair of tweezers and removed the hard plastic of the lens that covered the eye. With a hole established, the thing that had been Ryman carefully removed its human face and laid it on the table.

Beneath the latex was another mask, this time a Jex one. But it was impossible for Ryman to remove this – it had been grafted on to his Canavitchi features when he was no more than a child.

And with his hated new face in place, he had been exiled from his homeland and sent into the lair of the scorpions that had kept his people in bondage for a thousand years.

That was long ago.

He had lived several lifetimes, a superb mimic of Jex ways. A willing accomplice to those for whom he had worked but, all the time, a secret zealot in the cause of his own people who had suffered under the Jex yoke of oppression for so very long.

Because the Canavitchi life span was so much longer than that of the lice that enslaved them, the thing that had been Ryman had to leave the Jex it was with around every hundred years, and spend time on outlying worlds to create a new fantasy and then return to Jexa again. As one of *them*.

But the Canavitchi always hid it when it had to be hidden. Submerged it in their gestalt-like consciousness amid the phalanx of planets on which they had a presence. And it was during one of those periods that it had first come to Earth.

That had also been long ago. And Earth had changed.

The thing that had been Ryman pressed a concealed button beneath the rim of the mirror and the reflective glass was replaced, smoothly, by a screen that pulsed ultraviolet light. The thing that had been Ryman placed its hands on the screen and intoned words that were as old as time itself.

The screen came to life.

The Canavitchi were not like the Jex, except for the claws and the fangs. They were green and beautiful, slender and frail-looking, with faces that seemed benign.

They looked, in fact, as unwarrior-like a race as could be imagined. Many, many galactic would-be conquerors over the millennia had made the mistake of thinking the Canavitchi were weak and flaccid. Most came to regret the error of their beliefs.

‘We are at the threshold of the solar system,’ said a voice from within the screen. There were many Canavitchi faces present, but no one spoke. Or rather, they all did.

A single mind, formed from the remnants of a multitude of the broken and defeated. Out of defeat came strength in numbers. Came purpose and solidarity.

Came power.

‘Hunky-dory,’ the thing that had been Ryman said drily. ‘Come on in, the planet’s lovely.’

Voices in the head of the thing that had been Ryman seemed to remonstrate with it for its flippancy. But the overwhelming sensation it could feel was one of joy. A pure, unadulterated release of emotion that threatened to smother it.

‘We are near.’

The thing that had been Ryman spread its arms wide. ‘Come,’ it screamed at its brothers as they filled it with their thoughts and dreams and desires.

It had been alone for so long, in a world of bumbling humans and hated Jex.

Now, its own kind were with it, and it was renewed.

‘Come,’ it screamed again.

So, they came.

Chapter Eighteen

Destiny Calling

The only problem with Geoff Paynter's flawlessly executed plan to smoke out the pair of assassins by leading them to a deserted shack miles from anywhere was that there was now another journey to be faced.

The long walk back to the garage from the shack that had become Heldos's and Perico's tomb was painfully slow. The burning heat of the late afternoon sun didn't help. Tegan did her best to help the injured Paynter, but his blood loss was beginning to make her nervous.

Occasionally he stopped to inspect the jagged, gaping wound in his thigh. Luckily, the bullet seemed to have passed right through his leg since there was an exit wound at the back. And it didn't appear to have clipped the femur, which would have made walking virtually impossible.

Paynter had been worried that stray fibres from his clothes might have become embedded in the wound and, with the aid of Tegan's mirror, he had probed into it with his finger whilst he bit on a rolled-up piece of cloth to stop himself screaming.

Then, after ripping the ragged material away from the wound, he and Tegan had applied a makeshift bandage and he had set off at a limp.

On at least two occasions he almost passed out on Tegan's shoulder. They toddled and teetered for sickening seconds before he managed to pull himself back from the brink of unconsciousness and stand up straight, breathing in the sandy desert air.

Tegan decided to try to keep the captain awake by talking to him, just like she'd once seen Hawkeye do in an episode of *M*A*S*H*. So she began telling him some spasmodically amusing stories from her childhood.

She was just reaching the climax of a side-splitter about one of her cousins when Paynter stopped her.

'Tegan,' he rasped, and they staggered to yet another standstill.

'Yeah?' Tegan replied brightly.

'Do me a favour. Shut your bleeding cake-hole!'

That didn't go down very well. 'Charming,' she said, in a blasé Australian way that tried (unsuccessfully) to hide her distress. 'Don't get your knickers in a knot, sport, I'm only trying to help.'

'I know,' muttered Paynter. 'I'm sorry me old mucker, it's just you're doing a better job of putting me to kip for good than the bootboys back at the shack.'

Not surprisingly, this upset Tegan even more than him telling her to shut up. 'I wasn't looking to cobber up with you,' she said defensively. 'I only want to keep you alive.'

Paynter looked back at the shack in the distance. They had covered less than a mile in more than an hour. The garage still hadn't come into view, and twilight was approaching fast. At one point he and Tegan had been faintly aware of the distant drone of a helicopter, but they were some miles from where they were supposed to be and the chances of UNIT hanging around a pickup point for any length of time was, for security reasons alone as Paynter knew, very remote.

'Tegan. That's an unusual name,' he noted.

'It's Cornish. It means "lovely little thing",' she replied with a red-faced flush of the cheeks that could have been exertion but was almost certainly embarrassment. 'Parents do rotten things naming their kids. You should be allowed to name yourself when you're like ten or something. Before that, you could just have a number . . .'

Paynter considered this. 'You're weird,' he said at last. 'Oi mush,' he yelled, as Tegan went silent again. 'How did you think I handled myself back there?'

Tegan looked at Paynter and saw behind the grinning wide-boy façade someone who, like herself, had just faced death. 'You were superb,' she said truthfully.

'Taking out the sidekick was easy, but that Perico, he reckons he's a bit tasty.' Paynter stopped and corrected himself. '*Was* a bit tasty, I should say. That'll have done my street cred no harm whatsoever!'

A sudden wind billowed some sand up into their faces and they both coughed and spluttered and laughed at the ridiculousness of their situation. Chasing rainbows in the middle of a wilderness.

'Can I ask you something?' Tegan ventured after they had crawled another few yards closer to safety. 'Something important.'

'Sure,' said Paynter. 'Fire away.'

Tegan slackened her grip on his shoulder and turned to face him. 'You don't really think I've got a big bum, do you?'

It was at least ten seconds before Paynter found the courage to laugh. After all, it was supposed to be a serious question. 'Sorry love,' he said at last, 'but it's flaming enormous!'

Tegan released him and turned away, staring back towards the shack, now a mere speck on the horizon. 'Thank you,' she said, in a voice spray-painted with hurt.

'I'm sorry,' said Paynter, putting a bloodied and dirty arm around her. 'I was only joking.'

'It's all right,' Tegan replied after an agonising silence. 'I'm just a bit sensitive about my weight. I used to be pretty fat, see, when I was a kid. And other kids can be really hurtful about that kind of thing. I suppose it's a bit of a sore point. I'm sorry I brought it up.'

Now it was time for Geoff Paynter to do something heroic and manly. He knew that. And he accepted his responsibility, as he would do if ordered to massacre a peasant village. He turned her around to face him, wiped the beginnings of a tear away from her eye and kissed her, full on the lips. 'You're a beautiful young woman, Miss Jovanka,' he said when they parted, saliva still joining their dry mouths together. 'You've got a big gob, a temper that's worse than mine, and you're having the baddest bad-hair day of all time. But, right now, I can't think of anybody I'd rather be stuck in a desert with than you.'

Tegan closed her eyes. Ecstasy.

Über-ecstasy.

She tried to say something but Paynter placed a finger over her lips and shushed her from even trying.

'The best-looking woman I was ever with, long ago this was, she was a peach. Her name was Rachel Wheeler and I'd loved her since I was in short pants. She used to live around the corner from me. She was two years older and had done it by the time she was fifteen, and all that crap that seems important to people when they're that age.' Paynter kissed Tegan again, their teeth clashing briefly as they parted. 'Finally,' he said, catching his breath, 'I had her. She was my first. I was her . . . I dunno, twenty-ninth or something. It didn't matter. She made me a man.'

'Is this leading anywhere in particular?' asked Tegan, breaking her self-imposed silence.

'Only that she couldn't hold a candle to you,' Paynter concluded.

'You know how to say the right thing,' she murmured.

'Me?' Paynter seemed surprised that it had taken her so long to spot one of his better qualities. 'Oh aye, I'm the Frank Sinatra of Second Battalion, didn't you know? Well sussed, I am!'

Truth was that Tegan was only just starting to discover this. And she liked it.

'Don't be a poseur,' she told Paynter, with a humour that just a couple of hours before would have been impossible. 'We're still in a right kettle of fish out here. And it'll be dark soon. What was that you were telling me about how cold it gets at night in the desert?'

Paynter accepted her wisdom with a raffish smile and a wink. 'Then it's time we got a move on. I'll race you!'

'You can't run on that leg,' Tegan squawked. 'You can barely walk.'

'It'll hurt,' admitted Paynter, 'but it's only a scratch. Come on, you and me need to get back to civilisation pronto.'

'Still no word from them I'm afraid sir,' Natalie told an irritated Lethbridge-Stewart. 'The recovery team found two bodies at the garage one of which was ...' She stopped, and sniffed loudly. '... Sergeant Milligan.'

The Brigadier nodded without articulating the pain he, again, felt. Another phone call to another newly childless mother. He glanced across to the Doctor who seemed as though he were about say something. The moment passed.

'Any details?'

'I'm sorry no,' replied Natalie. She was clearly upset. 'Poor David. This happens all the time to me. Every time I smile at a man, he dies. It was the same with kittens when I was small.'

'Private Wooldridge,' snapped the Brigadier. 'Pull yourself together!'

'Yes sir,' she said, coming quickly to attention. 'There was no sign of either Captain Paynter, or of Miss Jovanka, though the early indications are that the other man who was shot had been killed with Captain Paynter's gun. The crew did a thorough recce of the immediate surrounding area, but they left the site after twenty minutes fearing they might be a target for attack themselves.'

Lethbridge-Stewart accepted the strategic manoeuvre. 'I'd have done the same thing, I suppose,' he said. 'All we can do now is wait and hope they contact us.' He turned to the Doctor and asked, 'So, do we continue with this meeting?'

If the Doctor harboured any doubts about the validity of what he was doing, now was most definitely not the time to show it. 'Under no circumstances do we fail to show up at InterCom. That would be a sign of weakness, Brigadier. Do you want to see your planet grovelling on its hands and knees to aliens?'

'Aren't you going to tell me that they're misunderstood? That they've really come in peace? Isn't that the way it usually works?' asked Lethbridge-Stewart, bitterly remembering countless occasions when he had been on the receiving end of the wrath of the Doctor's bombast.

The Doctor simply shook his head. 'Not this time.'

Natalie Wooldridge handed the Brigadier two automatic revolvers in leather pouches and produced a clipboard with a release form. As Lethbridge-Stewart signed the papers the Doctor looked at the weapons and then shook his head. 'Never touch them,' he said with a wry grin. 'They keep going off. People get hurt.'

'Concealed weapons are standard issue when entering an alien boardroom,' Natalie urged. 'Doctor, you've got to carry this. Mark Barrington and Dave Milligan are dead because of these people. I know there's not a snowball's

chance in hell that you're actually going to use it, but don't go all politically correct on us. We're fighting a war.'

It had been a long time since anyone had been so forthright with the Doctor on the subject of weapons. He weighed the gun in his hand, took it out of its wrappings and stared at the piece of cold, hard steel in his palm. It looked harmless and dormant, like a child's toy. 'Just so we understand each other,' he said at last. 'This goes against every principle I've ever stood for. Everything I believe in.'

Natalie appeared to understand. 'Come back alive,' she said, before suddenly realising that she had forgotten something. 'Hang on a second,' she said. 'I'll be back with the hand grenades in a moment ...'

'Hand grenades?' shouted the Doctor, horrified.

'Standard issue ...' repeated Natalie, leaving them.

'Odd girl that,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, pocketing his weapon. 'Talks a lot of sense for someone with such a limited intellect.'

'The problem with you, Brigadier, is that time left you behind.' The Doctor handed his gun to him. 'You'll look after this for me, perhaps?'

'I don't have a Time Lord's luxury of immaculate perception,' noted the Brigadier, picking up his overcoat. 'But I know how the world turns, Doctor. And it isn't always for the better.'

The garage was in sight now, as dusk settled over the harsh desert.

'Nearly there,' wheezed Paynter, who had finally come to a stop.

Several dozen yards behind him Tegan was doubled up in exhaustion, her hands on her knees, trying to shake the dizziness from her head. 'I can't,' she said at last, though the pain in her chest barely allowed the words to reach Paynter. 'You go on.'

'Come on,' Paynter shouted. 'Stop giving me grief. Do you want to get out of this poxy desert or not?'

Tegan stood, shakily, and limped a few paces towards him. He wore a po-faced expression of gritty determination that she, in the present circumstances, found utterly offensive. Why didn't the big ugly sod just keel over and hurt like she did.

She was starting to go off him again.

'You don't have to prove anything to me you know,' she said as she reached the scowling Paynter. 'That macho nonsense doesn't impress me one little bit.'

If Captain Paynter was feigning disinterest, he was making a pretty poor job of the deception. 'Let's just get home,' he said sullenly. 'This place is starting to really depress me.'

* * *

It had taken Turlough several hours to engage Eva in conversation again. He was, he felt, beginning to gain her confidence. Occasionally she would walk into his room and talk for a few minutes, before leaving to answer the telephone, or perform some other task of world-shattering importance. But she always came back to him.

'I'd have thought it was beneath your dignity, to get a baby-sitting job like this,' Turlough said.

Eva spent a considerable time mulling over this. She sat on the bed and took off her shoes, propping herself up on one elbow in a pose of casual disinterest. 'We all, in life, have to do things that are unpleasant,' she said after a moment. 'It is sometimes necessary. For the greater good.'

'Blah, blah, blah. World domination . . . ' Turlough was tired of the rhetoric. 'Listen,' he said, thumping the plastic bucket that had been dumped next to him for his toiletry needs. 'I'm sore and I'm cramped. This isn't the most comfortable floor in the world, you know. And I want to use the bog.'

Eva nodded towards the bucket. 'If you're worried about privacy . . . ' she began.

'I'm worried about dignity,' Turlough shouted. 'That thing stinks to high heaven. Come on, is that too much to ask?'

Eventually, Eva slipped off the bed and left the room. For several moments Turlough thought she had left him permanently, but eventually she returned with a key. Again she loomed over Turlough for an age, simply standing and staring the way a young boy would observe an insect trapped in a jam jar. Turlough looked up at her, his eyes begging for release, however limited. 'I really need to go,' he said, pleadingly. 'I'm desperate.'

Eva knelt beside him and unlocked the foot manacles. She moved to the handcuff and tugged Turlough's arm out in front of him. Her nails sank deeply into his palm and he bit his lip until it bled. The key turned smoothly in the lock and he was free.

Turlough felt the blood rush back into his hand after hours of pins and needles. Eva stood, dragging him with her. His legs were like mounds of jelly as the circulation returned to them. The woman's hand was on his neck, squeezing at his windpipe, threatening to cut off the air supply to his brain at the slightest wrong move.

'You can use the bathroom,' Eva said as the pressure was eased slightly. 'But no tri—'

Turlough would never know quite where the strength came from for him to heave the chain up and wrap it around Eva's neck. In life or death situations people can do strange and impossible things. His free hand groped around Eva's back. He found the loose links of the chain and pulled as hard as he was able to, choking the woman.

Her eyes bulged, huge like eggs, almost popping from their sockets. Her face turned red, then blue and her tongue snaked out of her mouth and hung limply to one side as unconsciousness loomed.

Eva's eyes began to roll upwards, exposing white domes of vacant flesh. And then one of them *did* burst from her face, crashed to the floor and rolled under the bed. Turlough found himself looking into a hollow, red, alien eye sunken beneath the ragged socket and the mask that was Eva's face.

With whatever courage he had left, he screamed a last scream of defiance and hatred and head-butted the thing that had been Eva full on the bridge of the nose. Then he let the chain dangle and fall to the floor. The thing's body followed, heavy and dead like a sack of potatoes. It lay still, a soft wheezing sound the only evidence that it was still alive.

Turlough picked up the chain and, without even thinking, brought it down with his full weight across the creature's face. Then again. Within seconds there was blood everywhere: splattered over the walls, the bed, the radiator and his clothes and face.

A third hit. A fourth. A fifth.

Turlough's teeth were fixed, as if glued together, in a snarl of rage. His heart pumped faster and faster. He screamed, wordlessly. A primal, bestial cry from the pit of his stomach.

Then he found the words.

'Come on!' he shouted. 'What's the matter. Get up and stick something in me, why don't you?'

The chain came down again and again, shattering several bones in the alien's face. After the next blow Turlough pulled up the chain to find that it had brought much of the facial mask of the creature that had once looked so human with it. He didn't give the mask a second glance, but raised the chain again and smashed it down, churning the alien's true face to a bloodied pulp.

'What's the matter?' he screamed. 'Nothing funny to say? Come on, say something funny now. Come on ...'

The attack continued until well after whatever life remained in the thing that had once been Eva's body had evaporated. Turlough kicked at the prone figure when the chain grew too heavy for him to lift. His strength was beginning to ebb, the animal rush of adrenaline subsiding to be replaced by lethargy and shortness of breath. But still he had enough fight in him to collect a mouthful of saliva and spit at the dead creature.

'Die, you bitch, die,' he said, tears welling in his eyes.

And then, suddenly, it was over and Turlough stood dazed and horrified above the blood bath.

For several moments he simply stared at the thing at his feet. Finally, when he could stand to look at it no longer, he turned and stumbled towards the apartment door.

And freedom.

Chapter Nineteen

Bring It On Down

‘They want to meet up with us?’ Giresse was absolutely astonished. ‘UNIT? This is some sort of trap, it has to be, surely?’

At the other end of the telephone Sanger was silent as though that thought had never even occurred to him. Finally he said, ‘I don’t know.’

Giresse, in his car with Luvik and another member of the conglomerate, Carter, had visions of machine-gun-wielding soldiers storming the InterCom complex. ‘Listen,’ he said quickly. ‘I’m on Ventura now, I can be at the site in forty minutes. Nothing simpler.’

Sanger laughed into the speaker grille and the sound rattled harshly at the other end. ‘Alain,’ he said, genially. ‘Go back to Europe and prepare our people for what is to come.’

Unsecured line or not, Giresse didn’t appreciate the implication that he was being fobbed off. ‘I still don’t like it,’ he said. ‘Why would . . .’

Sanger’s patience finally wore down to the knuckle. ‘Will you stop worrying,’ he snapped. ‘I can handle UNIT. They’re second-rate tin soldiers working for a third-rate dictatorship. Goodbye Alain.’

The conversation ended with a click. Giresse turned to his colleagues with a fragile smile that quickly fell to the automobile floor and shattered. ‘This is wrong,’ he said angrily.

Luvik didn’t know what to say. Instead, he looked out of the window at the palm trees flashing by as the car headed towards Van Nuys airport. Finally he came out of his shell. ‘What could UNIT possibly know? They’re . . .’ He searched for some phrase that would accurately describe his contempt for the organisation. For the planet. ‘Not as we are,’ he said at length, and gave a short, humourless laugh.

Carter was ready to agree, but Giresse still looked worried. He closed the thin communication window between the rear of the limousine and the driver’s seat and leaned forward, encouraging his colleagues to speak in conspiratorial whispers. ‘We are so near,’ he rasped. ‘So close to a 10,000-year-old dream of absolute conquest.’

‘Nothing can stop us now,’ Luvik replied, at equal volume. ‘Not even the Canavitchi.’

The name of their enemy seemed to strike Giresse like a dagger to his heart. He looked at Luvik with terror in his eyes. 'You are young and have seen nothing,' he snarled. 'I, on the other hand, have seen the Canavitchi destroy worlds, solar systems, in their blood-thirst. In their quest for revenge on us. Whatever you believe you know about them, they are a hundred times worse.'

In his office Sanger sat wondering whether the stress was finally getting to his old friend Giresse. Ultimately it didn't matter, with victory mere inches from their grasp. But still a nagging doubt danced merrily, stubbornly, in the back of Paolo Sanger's mind.

'Any word yet from Ryman?' he asked Michelle Stonebringer.

'Yes actually,' replied the secretary, pleased to be, for once, the bearer of some good news. 'He called in a few moments ago. It seems that the "problem with the overgrown schoolboys" you mentioned some time ago has been dealt with.'

'Really?' asked Sanger, recovering his optimistic outlook with this revelation.

Ms Stonebringer looked at her notepad and, without any emotion, read from it in a flat monotone voice: "'Tell Paolo that they've been taken to the woodshed and given a paddling they won't survive,'" she said. Closing the pad, she looked up and raised both eyebrows. 'I take it that was a metaphor for something?'

Sanger laughed, leaning backwards in his chair until it was almost horizontal. 'It certainly is, Michelle.' He paused and checked his watch. 'Have Chebb go over to Eva's place to bring that alien creature in, would you? I think it's time we stopped messing about and took his DNA. We're going to know soon enough what UNIT have on us.'

He stood and walked towards the boardroom window as the last rays of the dying sun set above the Santa Monica hills, plunging the valley into darkness.

The private InterCom jet stood on the deserted runway at Van Nuys airport, fuelled and ready for take-off as the limousine pulled up alongside it and Giresse, Luvik and Carter spilled out on to the tarmac stretching tired and cramped limbs.

It had been a long, long day with a number of twists and turns that had given Giresse in particular more than just a passive headache. But the end was finally in sight.

On the floodlit runway they stood for a moment, looking at what Los Angeles in the distance had to offer. A city of lights.

'I suppose we should be pleased with the progress,' noted Luvik, walking to the aircraft steps. 'After all, we've isolated the DNA gene. That's been our

main priority for the last decade. We've come so far in just a few days.'

Giresse looked uncertain, and not a little tired. '*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a à voir ici?*' he asked. And then repeated his question in English for Carter's benefit. 'What can you see?' He spread his arms wide and indicated the city beyond the airport.

Luvik shrugged. 'Los Angeles,' he suggested.

'Mankind,' corrected Giresse, brushing past Luvik and reaching the door of the plane. 'A race that shall soon be subservient and on their knees, grovelling for mercy. And, somewhere out there is a thorn in our side that would take them from us.'

'The Canavitchi?' asked Carter.

Giresse shook his head sadly, his doubts seemingly banished. 'The timetable for invasion should be unaffected,' he said. Then added. 'More's the pity.'

'I don't understand?'

'Have you ever had the feeling that you've been shafted?' Giresse asked.

The door of the aircraft closed and the three men turned to find the female pilot washing her hands in the basin behind the cockpit. She smiled at them, broadly.

'Hi gentlemen, I'm Phoebe,' she said as she shook her hands dry. 'I'll be your pilot on this trip. I shall also be your executioner.'

'There are none so blind as those that will not see,' said Giresse as he turned and tried to open the sealed door. Behind him, two rapid shots killed Carter and Luvik instantly. Giresse's hands slipped from the slick surface of the fixed door handle and he stared, uselessly at them, and it. He turned to face death and looked deeply and with curiosity into her eyes.

Black.

Black as the tar pits in the Jexxian H'jang valley.

'Nous ne sommes pas responsables.'

There was a coldness behind the black eyes that chilled Giresse. Froze him to the marrow. The last thing that he would ever see.

'Je suis désolé, je ne peux rien faire,' said Phoebe, pulling the trigger and shooting Giresse in the head.

'It's war in heaven, if you'll excuse the melodramatic cliché.' the Doctor told the Brigadier as they entered the lobby of the Intercom conference centre.

At the main desk a bored-looking reception girl provided them with security passes and waved them towards the elevators, without an escort, and with seemingly little interest in their conversation.

'So, what can you tell me about the other race involved?' asked Lethbridge-Stewart, taking comfort in the odious weight of the handguns and three

grenades concealed inside his jacket. He was astonished that they hadn't been searched for weapons upon entry.

'Decadent to the core,' said the Doctor, reading his thoughts. 'They don't believe they can possibly be attacked in their own building. Come to that, neither can I!' The elevator arrived and the Doctor peered cautiously into it. 'Booby-trapped?'

'I doubt it,' said the Brigadier, stepping confidently into it. 'That is the stuff of spy fiction and people with too much imagination! If they wanted to kill us, they could have done that twenty minutes ago at the security gate.'

'You are, of course, correct,' the Doctor said, joining his old friend in the elevator. 'The other race are called the Canavitchi. They were empire-builders themselves for many thousands of years. Then they were conquered and became part of the Jex empire. But eventually they overthrew their oppressors and have been chasing them across the universe ever since.'

This news cheered the Brigadier up considerably. He had visions of a noble, partisan and warrior-like race who had resisted and defeated those who sought to oppress them. 'So, these Canavoki chappies, they'd be happy to ally themselves with us, yes?' he asked hopefully.

His good mood rapidly crumbled, however, when he saw the amused look on the Doctor's face. 'Good gracious no, Brigadier. If anything the Canavitchi are worse than the Jex. They were a thuggish race of bug-eyed lunatics who stomped around space like hooligans. The Jex did to them what the Romans did to the French and the Germans. Organised them. The Canavitchi grew powerful enough to overthrow the occupying force and since then they have made it their business to undo everything the Jex get their hands on. They don't conquer worlds where there are traces of the Jex any more. They destroy them.'

The elevator arrived on the top floor with a clank and the doors opened. The Doctor and the Brigadier stepped out to face their destiny.

The relief on Paynter's face as he picked up the telephone at the garage was matched only by his exhaustion. Finally, he felt able to reveal to Tegan just how much pain he was actually in. But first he sat down, heavily, clutching the receiver to his ear with both hands as though some magic might take it from him.

Not without a fight, it wouldn't.

Tegan sat with him. She had cried when she saw Dave Milligan's body again, which horrified her as she'd only cried once when Adric died. Today seemed to have been a nonstop exhibition of the kind of emotion she had spent most of her life trying to smother. But Paynter had been encouraged

because there were footprints all around, indicating that the rescue team had been here once. They would, therefore, be able to return again.

'Come on sweetheart, answer the phone,' he muttered, having dialled Natalie Wooldridge's mobile. There was an agonising wait before the telephone spluttered into life.

'Captain Paynter, reporting for duty back from the dead,' he said quickly. Even from three feet away Tegan could hear the scream at the other end of the line.

'You're alive!' shouted Natalie.

This is just unreal, Tegan told herself. I'll wake up in a minute.

'Evidently,' Paynter told Wooldridge sarcastically. 'We're back at the garage site. We've been chased halfway across the desert by a pair of hitmen. Who are now toast, by the way. I've taken a bullet in the leg, and poor Tegan's nearly out on her feet ...' He shot Tegan a reassuring look, to which she returned a scowl. 'We'd appreciate a bit of a rescue, if that's possible, 'cos frankly we're knackered!'

'Stay right where you are,' Natalie told him. 'We'll have a chopper from Vegas there in five minutes.'

'You're a *trash* babe,' replied Paynter happily, popping the phone back on its cradle. 'So,' he told Tegan. 'The cavalry's on its way.'

Tegan couldn't think of anything to say except. 'Good.' But after a moment she found herself asking Paynter a question that had been at the back of her mind since they had left the shack. 'Were you scared?'

Paynter was busy cleaning his leg wound, wincing as he removed the cloth covering from the red-raw and angry flesh. 'Sorry?' he asked.

'Back in that grotty hovel. Facing death. Were you bricking it?'

Tegan wasn't sure what answer she expected from Paynter: bluff throwaway macho indifference or an honest, heartfelt admission of terror. She ended up with neither.

'Sort of,' he said. 'I was scared that you were going to scream the place down and give my secret plan away.'

'Oh really?' asked Tegan as the distant sound of helicopter rotor blades began to draw towards them. 'So it was all part of the plan, was it?'

'Yep,' said Paynter, removing his boots, shaking the sand from them and then putting them back on. 'Lure them in and shoot them down. I don't say it was an original plan, but I had it all worked out.' He stood, putting his weight gingerly on his wounded leg. The pain was obviously intense, judging by the grimace on his face.

Tegan looked at herself in the dark glass of the garage-shop doorway. She was dishevelled and felt completely dehydrated. She watched with a bemused expression as Paynter crossed to the petrol pumps and stood over the

dead garage man, swatting away the flies that buzzed around the numerous wounds on the body.

'Didn't work, me old china,' he told the corpse, kicking it heavily in the ribs. 'Cos, like see me, I'm *that* hard I am. I took out the disco bootboys. Easy!'

'It's the first sign of madness you know? Talking to yourself,' Tegan told him, as the whine of the helicopter came closer and the lights swooped out of the night sky. Tegan put her hands up to cover her mouth and eyes from the whirlwind of dust that flew in her direction. Blind and mute, she stood and waited until Paynter's voice cut rudely through her defences.

'Come on, darlin', look lively!'

'That's it, I quit!' muttered Tegan, running close to the ground towards the helicopter. It was already beginning to rise and Paynter put out a hand and pulled her into the cramped interior. As the ground slipped away from them, and she took a last fleeting look at Dave Milligan's now shrouded body, something deep within Tegan finally laid down and died. If cynicism is what this life requires, she told herself, then I can be the most cynical bitch the world has ever seen.

'What's the matter, sport?' she asked Paynter, slapping him hard on his bad leg. 'You afraid of a bit of exercise, or what?'

And they continued to bicker all the way to Los Angeles.

The door to Eva Oblon's apartment stood open. From the corridor Robert Chebb knew something was badly wrong.

A quick check of the holding cell confirmed the nagging doubt he'd had in the back of his mind since he found a bloodstained thumbprint on the exterior doors to the block. Something terrible had gone on here.

Something evil.

The face of the thing that had been Eva was unrecognisable, mashed beyond sanity or comprehension by a series of savage blows. Chebb knelt and felt for a pulse although he knew there would be none. Resisting an urge to either scream or vomit he moved quietly out of the cell and closed the door behind him. In the living room he picked up the phone and dialled Michelle Stonebringer's number.

'He's about to go into conference with the people from UNIT,' Michelle told him when he asked to speak to Sanger. 'If it's really urgent . . .'

Chebb felt a hysterical urge to wrap the telephone cord around Michelle's neck and tighten it until her head burst. 'No,' he said simply. 'It's a minor matter. I'll come over and speak to him when his meeting is concluded.' He replaced the phone, wiped his fingerprints from the receiver, opened Eva's drinks cabinet and removed a bottle of finest Scotch malt whisky, slipping it

into his pocket. Then he left the apartment, knowing it was only a matter of time before the place would be crawling with cops.

The sight of a young man splatter-painted with blood wandering up and down Sunset Boulevard, shouting and shaking his fists at the traffic, wasn't as uncommon as the average person might like to believe. But it was unusual enough for somebody to report it to the LAPD.

It had been a pretty quiet Friday night (all things considered) for the two uniformed officers cruising around central Hollywood in their patrol car when the call came through. Mike sighed deeply, wiping his mouth and putting the remains of his Taco Bell chalupa back in its packet.

'If it's not one thing, it's something else,' he told his partner, Dan, who responded to the call and turned the car around, initiating its wailing red siren.

It took the pair about twenty seconds to spot their target. And fifteen of those were because they were looking on the wrong side of the road. He was, they would decide, hardly making things difficult for them.

He was a slender, young white male with short red hair wearing what appeared to be a tight-fitting school uniform. The two officers exchanged intrigued glances before stopping the car a few feet from the suspect.

'Easy fella,' said Mike, getting out of the passenger side of the car. 'Whatever the problem is . . .' But he didn't get any further. The wild-eyed, crazed expression on the boy's face stopped him cold.

Dan, meanwhile, was down on one knee, his gun pointing directly at the youth. 'Stop right there,' he ordered. 'Not another step, pal. Or you go down.'

Chapter Twenty

Screen Kiss

Michelle Stonebringer led the Doctor and the Brigadier into Sanger's elegant boardroom. Sanger sat at the far end of the enormous table with Joyce, Elphinstone and Bois. They were idly chatting amongst themselves and for several seconds none of the men even acknowledged the arrival of their guests, an act of casual arrogance that made the Brigadier wish he could just shoot the lot of them here and now.

That would be proactive. He felt certain that the Doctor would approve.

The Doctor, meanwhile, seemed preoccupied and unwilling to take the lead. Thankfully, Lethbridge-Stewart had never been hampered by such inhibitions.

'Now look here,' he said loudly. The four members of the conglomerate turned towards him, slowly. There was something in the precise and simultaneous movement of the men that made Lethbridge-Stewart think of *The Midwich Cuckoos*.

That, and the soft, eerie light that bathed the room in a warming, translucent glow, brought the encounter to the edge of 'sinister' before it had even started.

'You must be from UNIT?' asked the person Lethbridge-Stewart recognised as Paolo Sanger. 'Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart I presume. And you are ...?' he asked looking at the Doctor with a detached curiosity.

'Me? I'm just a traveller,' replied the Doctor.

'And do you have a name, traveller?' asked Theydon Bois, seemingly amused by the introverted man in the decidedly odd clothes who was standing in front of them.

'I'm known as the Doctor.'

'Is someone ill?' asked Bois and was rewarded by a chorus of sycophantic laughter from his colleagues.

Lethbridge-Stewart, however, was not to be sidetracked by such nonsense. 'Now listen here, you men,' he barked. 'We know who you are, and we know what you're up to, so you can just jolly well put a stop to it, right now.' He glanced across at the Doctor for support. The Time Lord was smiling, seemingly encouraging the Brigadier to continue. 'That's about it really,' Lethbridge-Stewart concluded. 'All I have to say, anyway.'

Sanger's expression was pitched at the centre of an equilateral triangle that had bemusement, mockery and intrigue on its sides. 'You appear to have us at a slight disadvantage,' he said, after a few knowing looks had passed between himself and his colleagues.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning,' replied Elphistone, the well-spoken Englishman, 'that we have not the slightest idea what you're babbling on about, old chap.'

'Ah. I see.' Lethbridge-Stewart bristled with embarrassment. 'Yes, I concede I could have phrased that slightly better. A bit out of practice with you aliens do you see? I'm sorry if "alien" isn't the correct term these days ...'

Sanger drummed the tabletop with his fingers in irritation. 'It's marginally racist,' he said pointedly. 'But we accept it.'

'There's no reason for you not to,' interjected the Doctor, 'since the Jex's plans for this world probably don't include you skulking in the shadows for too much longer. Isn't that so?'

Suddenly, the conglomerate became very impressed. 'Once again, you have us at a disadvantage,' said Joyce. 'Though I don't expect you will live long enough to celebrate the fact.'

Paolo Sanger, however, gave his subordinate a contemptuous snarl. 'Don't be so melodramatic,' he growled. 'Where are our manners?' he asked, half-standing. 'Your revelation has, thankfully, ended the need for this uncomfortable charade. If you gentlemen will excuse something of a cliché, there are going to be some changes around here!'

He reached up to his face and carefully peeled away the skin of a mask. Beneath it pulsed the slow-breathing skull of a monster from Lethbridge-Stewart's worst nightmares.

At the far end of the table, the four creatures changed before the Brigadier's eyes. It was a terrifying sight as they literally ripped themselves apart and re-congealed in a throbbing mass of coarse, putrid flesh. The sound of cracking, fusing bone filled the room as they seemed to feed on the light, gobbling it like hungry beasts.

The process of revealing their domed heads was the worst aspect. If it felt half as painful as it looked and sounded, thought Lethbridge-Stewart, then they must be in agony.

'No more disadvantages,' rasped the thing that had been Bois.

'It would seem not,' continued the thing that had been Sanger. 'You believe you know what we are. *This* is what we are.'

'Never thought I'd see the pair of you alive again,' Mel Tyrone told Paynter and Tegan as they stepped down from the UNIT helicopter that had brought them back from the desert.

‘Rumours of our demise were greatly exaggerated,’ said Paynter as they clambered stiffly into the staff car which would take them to headquarters. ‘Any chance of a bath when we get there?’ he asked.

Tyrone laughed. ‘I think we might be able to arrange that.’ He turned his attention to the girl ‘And how’s Miss Tegan coping?’

‘She’s had better days,’ Tegan answered truthfully.

‘Well, at least I’m able to give you a bit of good news. Your friend Turlough was found by the LAPD on Sunset Strip. He was in a pretty bad way, but he’s basically all right. He’s getting checked over at the hospital now.’

The relief that Tegan felt was immense. So huge, so utter, that she scarcely believed it herself. ‘Thank you,’ she told Tyrone simply, and slumped exhausted back in her seat. Within seconds she was sinking into a deep, and for once untroubled, sleep.

The InterCom boardroom had descended into a tense silence in which the only sounds were the rasp of the creatures breathing and an occasional cough from Lethbridge-Stewart as his vocal cords adjusted to the thicker, more gaseous atmosphere. At last the Doctor broke the spell the Jex were creating.

‘A taste of things to come Brigadier,’ he said, pointing towards the dense purple mist that was seeping through one of the ventilator ducts. ‘It’s relatively harmless,’ he continued, noting Lethbridge-Stewart’s startled expression. ‘Trihexabenopolyethylochloride,’ he explained confidentially.

‘*What?*’ wheezed Lethbridge-Stewart.

‘Trihexabenopolyethylochloride,’ repeated the Time Lord. His voice seemed to the Brigadier to be coming from far away. ‘Looks deadly, but it’s actually nontoxic to humans,’ the Doctor continued, ‘although it’ll leave you a little short of breath until you get used to it.’

The thing that had been Paolo Sanger moved closer to the Doctor, its pincers clattering threateningly like castanets. ‘You know much about our gas,’ it said in a floating sibilant voice.

‘I know a lot about lots of things,’ the Doctor boasted. ‘I suppose you could say I’m an expert. And do you know what the definition of an expert is? It’s somebody who knows more and more about less and less, until eventually they know everything about nothing, do you see?’

‘Enough,’ growled the thing that had been Theydon Bois. ‘*What are you?*’

‘An exile,’ the Doctor told him truthfully.

Before the conversation could continue the door of the conference room opened and Ryman stood silhouetted, an astonished look on his face as he glanced from the two visitors to the conglomerate members.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ he asked.

'Where have you been?' the thing that had been Sanger hissed. A menacing question in answer to one of surprise and concern.

Ryman entered the boardroom and shut the door behind him, clearly startled to find that his colleagues were in their true form in front of the Doctor and the Brigadier.

'We have guests,' he said, looking at the soldier and the Time Lord. 'This is all rather informal for guests.'

'They know,' the thing that had been Joyce told him.

The thing that had been Sanger waited for several seconds before adding, 'Everything.'

'Well, perhaps not quite everything,' the Doctor told Ryman with a charming smile. 'But we know what you are. We know why you're here, and we know what you intend to do with this planet. And, I suppose, we're here to tell you that we won't allow the Jex to destroy, enslave or otherwise persecute humanity.'

'That's right,' echoed the Brigadier, with the perfect timing of a comedy straight man. 'None of those things,' he deadpanned.

There was amusement in the throaty splutter that emerged from the thing that had been Paolo Sanger. Words tumbled over themselves in a bid for freedom. 'Doctor,' it rasped, 'you are a fool if you believe that the Jex can be stopped that easily.' As it said this, its claw-like pincers scratched at a flapping sliver of skin over its eyes. It drew the strip from its forehead with a slow and deliberate sucking sound. When the skin was free, it was casually flicked on to the floor at the Doctor's feet. 'Mere words cannot hold us back, any more than the puny weapons of your world can,' the creature said arrogantly.

'No indeed,' agreed the Doctor. 'I rather think that it is actions that will stop your invasion. The Canavitchi, for instance. Now *they're* a very action-orientated race.'

There was disquiet in the group. The Brigadier sensed immediately that the Doctor had unnerved most of the aliens by casually slipping a mention of their mortal enemies into the conversation. The thing that had once been Joyce counterattacked with a vicious bluster that the situation almost certainly didn't require.

'We shall kill every last one of those insolent scum. We shall spit on the bones of the final Canavitchi when we have wiped their verminous stench from the universe. We will defeat them, as we always have defeated them.'

The conversation stopped and the thing that had been Sanger sat down again. Ryman continued to shuffle nervously in his human form. 'Do you want me to change?' he asked at last.

'Up to you,' hissed the thing that had been Sanger.

The Doctor returned to the subject of the Canavitchi. ‘That’s an interesting tactical assessment,’ he told the aliens. ‘Because, from what I know of my ancient history, the Canavitchi were always more powerful and deadly than the Jex.’

‘If that is so,’ said Ryman, who had remained unchanged, ‘then how were they defeated?’

Lethbridge-Stewart raised a quizzical eyebrow in the Doctor’s direction, indicating that he, too, was interested in the answer to this. From a purely professional point of view.

‘The Canavitchi had controlled an empire for a dozen millennia,’ the Doctor began, using the curve of the conference table to signify the spiral of their galaxy, like a master storyteller. ‘They had conquered worlds and spread like a plague They were feared, Brigadier. The modern equivalent would be the Daleks. It’s *that* level of power and conquest.’

‘So what happened to them?’ asked Lethbridge-Stewart.

‘Yes Doctor, tell us what happened,’ the thing that had been Joyce asked.

‘Like all powerful dictatorships based on military strength and megalomania, they got decadent and lazy,’ the Doctor replied simply. ‘They stopped scaring people as much as they once had. The Jex came along at just the right time, picking off a few outlying worlds in the empire. When the Canavitchi didn’t respond to their incursions, frankly because they couldn’t be bothered, the Jex went right to the Canavitchi homeworld. Within thirty years they had conquered it from within. A velvet revolution with hardly a shot fired. By the time the Canavitchi tried to organise themselves into a resistance movement, it was too late.’

The thing that had been Sanger clearly approved. ‘An excellent summation of a truly epic period in the history of my race,’ it told the Doctor. ‘When we were kings of the galaxy.’

But that didn’t tie in with the present situation, and Lethbridge-Stewart still needed more answers. ‘So, how do we go from that to where we are now?’ he asked.

The Doctor smiled indulgently and turned to the Jex with his arms spread out across the vast expanse of the table/galaxy. ‘The Canavitchi empire was too big for the Jex, Brigadier,’ he said. ‘They were brilliant organisers. Still are for that matter. But it was all they could do to hold down the Canavitchi on their own world and a few key outposts, let alone right across the galaxy. They became like the Canavitchi – brutal, vicious slave masters. They killed two-thirds of the Canavitchi in an attempt to make them conform. But they never quite broke them.’

‘They had it coming,’ hissed the thing that had been Bois.

‘And then several centuries later, having organised the Canavitchi from

mindless thugs into intellectual thugs, they found themselves with a rebellion on their hands the like of which they weren't prepared to face.'

The Doctor paused and looked at the Jex for comments. None were forthcoming. With the exception of the thing that had been Bois, they seemed to be agreeing with him. 'It took, what, fifty years for you to lose everything?'

'In your terms about eighty,' replied the thing that had been Sanger, sadly. 'Worlds collapsed one after another.'

'Worlds were destroyed one after another,' corrected Ryman, giving the Doctor a curious glance. 'I'm intrigued to know how you know so much about our history.'

The Doctor was clearly pleased someone had asked the question. 'I've been around a bit you know,' he said. 'And history is important. Without knowledge of your history, you cannot determine your destiny, do you see?'

The thing that had been Theydon Bois had clearly had enough of the history lesson. It stood aggressively and banged the table, startling its conglomerate colleagues. 'This exercise in semantics is getting us nowhere,' it roared. 'Why are we allowing this whatever it is to come into our stronghold and lecture us on where we went wrong two thousand years ago?'

'Well, if you want to spend your lives constantly running and looking over your shoulders -' began the Doctor.

Lethbridge-Stewart interrupted in a cautious tone. 'Doctor,' he said, 'I'm not entirely sure that you should be giving these creatures advice on better battle techniques.'

'With a potential mole in our conglomerate,' the thing that had been Joyce hissed, 'we appreciate the insight.' The irony was seemingly lost on its colleagues who all turned to the creature, menacingly.

'It's no secret, surely?' it asked.

'In fact, it's rather obvious,' the Doctor noted. 'I'd have said it was somebody within this very office, wouldn't you?'

He looked closely at the still-human form of Ryman. 'Just so we're clear about this,' he continued, 'if and when you stop the Jex invasion plans, your race are not staying either.'

The thing that had been Paolo Sanger turned to look at Ryman, with hatred blazing in its red eyes. 'You,' it hissed as realisation dawned.

The Doctor glanced at Lethbridge-Stewart and the pair began to move, slowly, towards the door.

'How did he die?' Natalie asked Tegan, who gave the tall English girl a look that mixed pity and contempt. 'Dave Milligan's gone, just accept it,' she wanted to shout.

'Alone and afraid, just like everybody else,' Tegan replied at last. Reinvention, she decided, was something that she should try more often.

Natalie considered this, seeming to miss the implication that she was being savagely patronised. 'Poor David,' she said at last. 'He was a true gentleman.'

That wasn't quite what Tegan had expected to hear and a nagging doubt began to chant in the furthest recesses of her consciousness. *Nothing in life is ever straightforward* it told her. As Natalie thanked her and shuffled off towards the coffee machine, Tegan's little voice added another thought. *People are a complex amalgamation of emotions, experiences and feelings* it said. *They cannot be summed up in stereotypical bursts of blind prejudice.*

Tegan looked across the UNIT mess room to where a freshly showered Paynter was lying on a camp bed. His bandaged leg was slightly raised with a pillow beneath it. In one hand was a bacon sandwich, whilst a cup of extra-strong tea steamed slowly next to the bed. Paynter took a huge bite from the sandwich, belched as he swallowed and used his free hand to scratch his belly. He looked up at Tegan, and winked.

'All right, love?' he asked. 'You feeling a bit less that time of the month?'

People are a complex amalgamation of emotions, experiences and feelings. They cannot be summed up in stereotypical bursts of blind prejudice Tegan's voice repeated. *Except, maybe, Captain Geoff Paynter who's a complete and total dickhead!*

'You're a complete and total dickhead,' she berated him, proving to herself at least that she was somebody who said what she thought.

Paynter hobbled off the bed and moved across to Tegan, draining the last of his tea. 'What's brought this on?' he asked. 'You were all sugar and spice back in the desert.'

'I wasn't thinking straight,' Tegan concluded. 'Like you said, temporary insanity brought on by the pressure of the situation. I'm better now.'

'Looks like it,' Paynter noted with an up-and-down bit of mental undressing that Tegan found murderously offensive.

'Do you do it deliberately?' she asked, seemingly desperate to understand.

Paynter was genuinely unsure about what he was being asked. 'Do I do what deliberately?'

'Be an offensive sexist windbag. A dinosaur from the age when men were men and women were glad of it.'

'What did I say?' Paynter asked with a mixture of amusement and confusion. 'You're bloody paranoid, darlin'.'

Tegan returned to stamping her foot, just as she had back at the garage. 'I *am not* your darling, or anything like it.'

'Which, personally, I'm rather glad about,' Paynter said caustically. 'I'd hate to take you down the pub to show off to me mates, you'd probably end up

knifing most of them.'

'I *still* hate you,' said Tegan without the tears this time. Instead, there was a cold, hard certainty in her voice. Almost rehearsed.

'*Still* mutual,' replied Paynter.

Tegan slapped his face. Again. Paynter responded in kind, more gently this time, but with the reproach of someone who was getting sick of the game. When she raised her hand to return his blow, he again caught her arm in midair and twisted it, pulling her closer to him.

They stared at each other.

'This is stupid,' Paynter said. 'It's a crass romantic comedy subplot that's impressing precisely no one.'

'Agreed,' said Tegan, her lips touching his. 'It's an insult to our intelligence!'

'And intelligence should be our first weapon, shouldn't it?'

'You never know,' replied Tegan. 'It might get better!'

The police car arrived at the entrance to the UNIT headquarters.

'You sure this is the right place?' Dan asked Turlough. 'It's a bit of a rough neighbourhood.'

'Yeah, it's like one of those secret-base-type things,' said Turlough, conspiratorially. 'So you guys will have to forget you were ever here, or the UN will be forced to kill you!'

Dan and Mike laughed and opened the car door for their passenger as Mel Tyrone appeared at the backstairs to take Turlough out of police custody.

'Hey Vislor,' said Mike, quickly. 'Look after yourself, man.'

Turlough threw his arms around the two bear-like LA police officers and hugged them both to the point of embarrassment. When he finally released them, he thrust his fist towards Dan in a gesture he'd learned from the big man in hospital.

'Respect,' he said, as their knuckles touched.

'Is due,' responded Dan, with a smile. 'You stay out of trouble, y'hear?'

The officers returned to their car as Turlough waved to them.

'New friends?' asked Tyrone.

Turlough looked unsure how best to answer him. 'I was looking for a bit of kindness,' he said. 'I'm sure there's some syndrome that it could be classified under.' He put his arm around Mel Tyrone's shoulder as if he were a long-lost friend. 'The hospital psychiatrist told me that I have to find my trust in humanity again. I didn't have the heart to tell her that it wasn't humanity that I was worried about.'

As they took the elevator to the fourth floor, Turlough continued to talk at a hundred miles an hour about his treatment and about how good he felt. About himself. About life in general.

'I'm glad,' Mel told him as the doors opened and they walked along the corridor towards the mess room. 'You'll need to have a good grip on your sensibilities over the next few days, a lot of things have happened whilst you've been away.'

'So I see,' said Turlough as the pair entered the mess room and found Paynter and Tegan glued together, attached at the mouth, eyes closed.

There was a disgusted look on Turlough's face. 'Can we go somewhere else so that I can tell you everything I know about the Jex's plans?' he asked.

Some moments later Mel Tyrone returned to the mess room to find Tegan and Paynter still in the middle of their (seemingly breathless) eternal kiss.

He coughed, loudly. Three times. Finally the pair parted and stared at him with a look that asked *What's the matter, have you never seen two people who hate each other's guts going at it like rabbits before?*

Tyrone coughed again. Apologetically. 'OK,' he said, with bright embarrassment. 'Sorry to interrupt, kids, but from what Turlough has just told me, I'm thinking it might be wise for Captain Paynter to get over to the InterCom complex with a few guys and a lot of guns.'

Paynter dropped Tegan like a piece of hot coal and grabbed his Kalashnikov from the table. 'Trouble?' he asked, seemingly desperate that the answer be in the affirmative.

'Forearmed is forewarned,' replied Tyrone as Paynter rushed from the room.

The things that had been Sanger, Joyce, Elphistone and Bois closed in on Shaun Ryman.

He gave an animal scream and savagely tore the skin from his face to reveal the alien features beneath.

'He looks the same as them,' whispered the Brigadier as the Jex closed in on their enemy.

'Genetically engineered,' the Doctor speculated. 'Deep plant. He's probably been with the Jex since he was a child. Indoctrination is a persuasive tool Brigadier,' he continued as they reached the door, forgotten by the aliens who were about to settle some long-term accounts.

The thing that had been Ryman sprouted limbs and claws and emerged from the wreckage of its human form in a terrifying eruption of meshed membranes, veins, arteries, flesh and bone. Its clothes lay discarded on the floor, ripped and saturated with thick and viscous alien haematemes and protein that clotted to the material and hardened almost instantly.

'Witness the new flesh,' croaked the thing that had been Ryman, its teeth cutting through the remains of Ryman's jaw mask and tearing it away from the chin. 'I am whole again,' it continued.

The thing that had been Sanger flew at the thing that had been Ryman, followed by the rest of the Jex and they fell to the floor with a sickening thud in a furious *mélange* of limbs and torsos. The Jex poured on to the traitor, tearing at its skin with their claws and teeth, ripping it to shreds.

'We can end this now,' the Brigadier said, reaching into his pocket and removing the grenades.

The Jex continued to grapple with the dying Canavitchi. Then the thing that had been Theydon Bois looked up from its feast, blood cascading from its mouth. 'We'll be right with you,' it said, horrifyingly.

That settled it.

The Doctor gave Lethbridge-Stewart a sad glance. 'I'm not a man of violence,' he said simply.

'Doctor for God's sake, this is war,' urged the Brigadier, removing the pins from his three grenades and tossing them in an arc towards the alien creatures. Then he grabbed the Doctor and they hurled themselves through the door as, behind them, the room exploded in a pyrotechnic cascade.

For several seconds Lethbridge-Stewart and the Doctor lay in the corridor, covered in dust, rubble and fragments of the exterior wall that had been unable to withstand the impact. Finally, as the ringing in his ears stopped, the Doctor slowly picked himself up from the floor and looked into the room.

Through the billowing smoke and amid the carnage it was difficult to see where one creature ended and the next one began. The huge panoramic window of the conference room was gone, replaced by a few jagged fragments of glass. Through this escape route the smoke and dust streamed out into the Los Angeles sky, completely blotting out the sun.

The walls of the room had buckled, but had held. Somewhere within the room, a sprinkler system had automatically kicked into operation and the rubble was being flooded with jets of water from above. The table and Sanger's desk were all gone, consigned to matchwood and smashed beneath the chunks of masonry that had been the ceiling.

The Brigadier appeared at the Doctor's side, slapping himself on one ear.

'That was a loud one,' he yelled at the top of his voice.

'Quite a successful demolition,' noted the Doctor with genuine regret and sadness.

'What?' shouted Lethbridge-Stewart, looking puzzled.

'We have about five minutes before this place is crawling with very upset aliens,' the Doctor told him as he took his old friend by the elbow and led him down the corridor to the elevator.

Chapter Twenty-One

Fear of a Dead Planet

The reception area of the InterCom building had turned into a scene of carnage as the Doctor and the Brigadier emerged from the elevators, the latter with his revolver still in his hand, to find Captain Paynter and his dedicated ten-man force engaged in running fire-fights with a greater number of green-uniformed InterCom guards. And, amid them, three Jex in their true form.

‘They’re not doing much to hide themselves,’ the Brigadier shouted as he and the Doctor moved towards the reception desk and threw themselves into the small gap behind Paynter, whilst the captain fired a continuous, withering barrage of automatic gunfire at an area beside the stairwells.

A stream of shots crisscrossed the open spaces as men found their range and fired everything they had at the enemy.

And amid the sheer wall of bullets, a startled Robert Chebb walked into the building and found himself in a scene from *The Wild Bunch*.

‘What the hell is going ...’ he began, hands on hips, a look of almost comical anger on his face. Instinctively he reached for his weapon, outraged that someone would dare to take up arms in his kingdom.

Then one of the UNIT soldiers shot him in the back and he slumped to the floor, dead.

The sight of the Jex, their tentacles and claws flailing as bullets exploded around them, had surprised the Brigadier. ‘What caused them to reveal themselves?’ he asked Paynter as the captain crouched down to reload.

‘I don’t know, sir. It just happened when we walked in. Maybe they didn’t think the charade was worth keeping up any longer. The receptionists ran screaming at the first transmutation,’ Paynter said with a wry grin. ‘But these boys don’t seem to care who they’re working for. The bastards.’ He unloaded another burst of terrifying gunfire and then downed his weapon and saluted the Brigadier and the Doctor. ‘Nice to see you alive sirs,’ he said, ironically. ‘Not that I really expected anything else.’

‘The local Jex command structure is currently lying in a pool of its own blood upstairs, thankfully,’ Lethbridge-Stewart said, returning the salute. He turned to the Doctor. ‘Militarily, I know exactly what to do next,’ he said. ‘But what about wider issues?’

‘It’s a question of global significance now,’ the Doctor shouted above the noise of the battle.

‘There can’t be more than thirty members of the conglomerate around the world,’ Lethbridge-Stewart replied at equal volume. ‘We can deal with them without too much trouble. Captain Paynter, are reinforcements on their way?’

As the question was asked a loud explosion turned many heads in the direction of the main doors where, it seemed, UNIT’s entire North American force was storming into the building, guns blazing.

‘Here come the boys now,’ said Paynter aggressively. ‘Go on lads, get stuck in and give them a damn good shellacking,’ he shouted across the foyer to the newly arrived troops. ‘Secure the building. Maximum prejudice.’

‘Take a man round the rear, Sergeant,’ yelled the Brigadier to one of Paynter’s men as soldiers continued to pour through the glass doors. ‘Block all the exits.’ He turned back to the crouching Doctor, a broad smile on his face. ‘Just like old times, eh?’ he asked. ‘International Electromatics all over again. The cleaning-up operation may take a bit longer, but we’re on our way.’

‘No, Brigadier,’ the Doctor said simply, as a lull in the firing brought a lowering in the volume of their conversation. ‘An invasion is closer than ever. And there is little that Earth can do to stop it.’

There was an almost eerie silence now. The battle had moved up the stairwells and on to another floor and only two UNIT gunners lay at the foot of the stairs with their machine guns occasionally spitting bullets up into the open spaces above. The Doctor, Lethbridge-Stewart and Paynter stood up in the virtually deserted foyer. Around them there were Intercom bodies everywhere, dead and dying, a few twitching spasmodically and still clinging grimy to life. Paynter walked over to Chebb, turned the corpse over and closed the dead man’s eyes. Then he went to check on the one injured UNIT man lying on his side by the elevators. ‘Man down. Get the medics in here now,’ he shouted to one of the remaining soldiers.

‘Are you telling me this has all been for nothing?’ asked the Brigadier.

The Doctor didn’t reply.

‘I don’t suppose now’s the time to tell you what you missed whilst you were away, either?’ Paynter asked.

‘No it damn well isn’t,’ Lethbridge-Stewart snarled. ‘Let’s get back to HQ, and we can figure out how to stop yet another invasion.’

UNIT headquarters a day later. And in that twenty-four hours enough had happened to see the building awash with activity.

The Doctor stood in the strategic command room on the top floor, staring at a map of the city, poring over every last detail of roads, junctions and intersections. Paynter appeared at his shoulder.

‘Big place, this. Bigger than Sunderland.’

The Doctor seemed to appreciate the irony. ‘It certainly is.’ He walked around to the other side of the room for another perspective. ‘I’ve noticed a change in Tegan,’ he continued without taking his eyes from the huge map.

Paynter tried to act nonchalantly. ‘Really?’ he asked in the kind of slightly quivering voice normally used by men shortly before their girlfriend’s older brother snaps their arm in two. ‘Can’t say that I had.’

‘Yes,’ noted the Doctor, still seemingly fully engrossed in the evacuation routes through the east of the city and into the surrounding desert. ‘It’s little things, you know? She’s started singing all the time. Love songs, mainly. And she’s taken to looking at catalogues with wedding dresses in them.’

‘Oh Jesus,’ said Paynter. Then he saw the Doctor’s innocent ‘who me?’ look instead of the expected cruel smirk. ‘Very funny,’ he snapped. ‘I didn’t know Time Lords were big on sarcasm. Listen, nothing happened . . .’

The Doctor moved to a smaller version of the map on a cork drawing board on the far wall. ‘This shall be the site of Armageddon,’ he said dramatically. ‘Or the closest equivalent this world will ever see, I fancy.’

‘You’re expecting a rough one then?’ asked Paynter.

‘I’m expecting total war, Captain,’ the Doctor answered, sadly. ‘Annihilation on a scale that this part of the galaxy has never known before. And all we can do is watch it happen.’

Paynter tried to be philosophical about the coming of two mighty forces that would use Earth as a minor inconvenience; a mere rock in the middle of their battleground. ‘A case of cannons to the left of ’em, volleyed and thundered?’ he asked.

‘Ah,’ noted the Doctor, looking up from the map and smiling. ‘A man who knows his Tennyson? I approve.’

‘I had a limited education,’ replied the soldier. ‘But I learned one or two things!’

‘I saw the charge of the Light Brigade,’ the Doctor said wistfully, remembering the valley in the Crimea and the brave horsemen blown to pieces by roaring Russian cannons. ‘Magnificent folly. If you’ll excuse such an unreconstructed oxymoron.’

Paynter didn’t look as though he was entirely sure what an oxymoron was. ‘I saw the film with David Hemmings,’ he replied, hoping this wouldn’t make him sound like a Philistine. ‘That was good. I liked it. It was antiwar, but it was antiwar from the soldiers’ perspective.’

‘I don’t follow?’

Paynter sat down as he tried to formulate exactly what he wanted to say, with much use of hand gestures. ‘Normally if something’s antiwar, it means it’s full of boring speeches by philosophy students wearing John Lennon glasses

who haven't got a clue what the real world is like, do you know what I mean? My grandfather and five of his brothers fought in the war against fascism. He was at Dunkirk. One of his brothers was in the company that liberated Dachau. Another one died in a Singapore POW camp. They were *all* antiwar. Anybody with any sense is. But sometimes you've got to fight for your right *not* to fight.' He paused, unsure if he was making any sense, but the Doctor's eyes encouraged him to continue. 'You'll find that any soldier who's ever been into combat is, at heart, pacifist. It's a paradox, isn't it?'

'My life in microcosm,' said the Doctor ruefully. 'I always seem to be walking through battlefields, wading knee-deep in the carnage and spouting some soliloquy about dogma and misunderstanding. Agincourt, Waterloo, Rorke's Drift, Passchendaele, El Alamein, My Lai . . . I saw them all. The worst horrors of Earth's history have happened because powerful men wanted them to happen. And because other people – good people – did nothing, or waited too long to do anything to stop them.'

Paynter was silent for a moment. 'I guess sometimes it's our responsibility to save the unfortunate from the tyranny of the fortunate.'

'And on that note,' said the Doctor, patting the soldier on the back, 'we have much work to do.'

They found Tyrone putting down the hot-line phone to the president.

'How is he today?' asked the Doctor, who had, himself, spoken to the man late yesterday evening and told him of his own experiences of the two races involved. The Doctor had been intrigued by the President's intelligence and wit, and by the fact that he clearly knew enough about extraterrestrials from Pentagon files for the Doctor not to have to battle to make his story believable to a sceptic. 'They'll never understand this in Ohio,' the President told him, as he ended their conversation with the hope that he and the Doctor would live to see each other in a few days' time.

Tyrone thought for a moment. 'He's being surprisingly philosophical about the future. He's obviously concerned that most of southern California may well be about to go up in flames, but he's taking the pragmatic rather than the political view of things. Lucky it's not election year, really.'

'Saving lives in the face of intergalactic bullyboys might look good to the voters,' ventured Paynter. The Doctor and Tyrone both looked at him as though he were mad. 'So what did he say when you told him Los Angeles was about to burn?' asked the captain.

'He said "it wouldn't be the first time",' Tyrone confided, just as Lethbridge-Stewart came into his office. He seemed to have aged dramatically in the last twenty-four hours, the silver threads now significantly outnumbering the gold.

There were salutes, given and returned, as Lethbridge-Stewart sat down wearily and put a bunch of papers on Tyrone's desk. 'The latest for Geneva and from the tracking stations around the world,' he told the Doctor. 'You may want to have a look at those when you get the time.'

'Time . . .' said the Doctor, sadly. 'It's the one thing we –'

He was interrupted by the telephone ringing. All men looked at each other for several seconds before, finally, the Brigadier picked up the receiver.

'Lethbridge-Stewart,' he said crisply. 'Yes. Yes, he is . . .'

He handed the phone to the Doctor. 'For you,' he offered. 'An old friend.'

The Doctor took the receiver and listened for an agonisingly long time to what the voice at the other end had to say. He only interrupted twice, to get certain facts repeated to him. At length, he thanked the caller and put down the telephone, looking up to find a row of expectant faces, including Tegan and Turlough who had also come into the room.

'I have to go out,' he announced dramatically. 'You too, Brigadier. It seems someone is keen to help the world with its problems.'

There could hardly have been a more inconspicuous place for the confrontation. A patch of overgrown scrubland off Highway 5 on the northern outskirts of Los Angeles and in the shadow of the Santa Susana mountains. Paynter had volunteered to drive the Doctor and the Brigadier to their destination, but had been left with the jeep whilst the Time Lord and the old soldier struggled the final few hundred yards up a twisting dirt track to find Control sitting alone in his car. He looked pale and drawn, wearing a Stetson that cast a deep shadow across his face.

'I thought you said no vehicle could get up here,' the Doctor panted, before adding, 'I should like a hat like that.'

Control shrugged, ignoring the flippancy. 'I lied,' he admitted simply. 'You're very prompt.'

Despite his lack of breath, Lethbridge-Stewart found the energy to tell him, 'We didn't expect to see you at all.'

As the Doctor and the Brigadier sat themselves in the back seat of the car, Control handed them a hip flask. The Doctor declined, but Lethbridge-Stewart gladly accepted and gulped the whisky deeply, grimacing as the stinging alcohol kissed his throat. 'Thank you,' he gasped. 'So, why are you here?'

'Like your alien friend said,' Control noted, pointing to the Doctor. 'Everybody needs somebody . . .'

'Or words to that effect,' the Doctor agreed. 'But let's drop all the kiddology. You and I both know why we're here and the Brigadier's smart enough to work it out as we go along.'

'I am?' asked Lethbridge-Stewart, rather surprised by this revelation.

'Of course you are,' snapped the Doctor. 'So . . .'

Control still looked like an aged cat that had sat in the dark too long, overfed and content with its lot in the world. But his eyes told another story, of predatory days in the sun, catching and killing and indulging in deadly, multilayered games. 'Confession is good for the soul,' he said, with a cynical smile.

The Doctor was surprised. 'You actually believe in the soul?'

'The CIA's collective mind is not yet made up on that matter,' Control replied enigmatically. 'However, I *would* like you to extend an official apology from the agency to your young friend Turlough for surrendering him to the Jex and putting him, I understand, through a week of not-very-pleasant medieval-style torture.'

'I'm sure you'll understand when I tell you I'm fairly certain Turlough wishes he were here personally so that he could spit your apology back in your face,' replied the Doctor.

'Yes, and beat me to death with a poker if what went on in that downtown apartment is anything to go by,' Control said. 'How'd you ever get him away from the police without even a charge of second-degree murder? Diplomatic immunity?'

'Something like that,' replied the Doctor.

Lethbridge-Stewart was, as usual, becoming irritated by the meandering nature of the conversation. Again, it seemed to be crawling into colliding circles.

'Do you have any more confessions to make?' he asked. 'Particularly some that have a relevance to where we go from here?'

Control looked out of the window at a deer standing stock-still on the hillside, framed in perfect harmony with nature against the pink-grey sky of early evening. For several seconds the creature was like a porcelain statue, its breathing barely discernible. And then, sensing movement, it turned and bolted away down the hill towards the Los Angeles reservoir. 'We also helped get the Canavitchi spy inside the Japanese complex to steal the Jex's DNA research,' he said at last. 'That's the one aspect of this mess that always troubled me. It was a suicide mission and she knew it. She knew what would happen if they captured her, and she knew that capture was likely, maybe even inevitable. But she didn't seem to care.'

There was a similarly distant look in the Doctor's eyes. 'Indeed. Fanaticism often brings with it a queue of martyrs several miles long. I imagine there'll be a monument to her on Canavitch, somewhere. They'll name a public holiday after her. If they celebrate public holidays of course . . .'

'Doctor,' exploded the Brigadier. 'To the point, please . . .'

Control cast a disgusted glance at the soldier and then turned his attention back to the Doctor. 'Intelligent enough to keep up, you said?'

The Doctor ignored the insult to his friend. 'So, to sum up. Yet again, you've brought humanity to the brink of destruction and placed the Earth in the middle of an alien war-zone. Let me know if I'm being unduly harsh at any point?'

Control merely smiled, whilst the Brigadier showed his horror at the CIA man's lack of an apology for his actions. 'You are an unspeakable wretch,' he said angrily. 'You don't care, do you? It's all a game to you.'

'Of course it is,' said Control. 'What is life, if not a game?'

'You do really make something of a habit of this, don't you?' asked the Doctor.

'Well, I guess you could say we've been surfing blind with two aces up our sleeve,' noted Control. 'If you'll excuse such a terribly mixed metaphor.'

'Meaning?' asked the Brigadier, but Control didn't reply.

Instead, he was again looking into the distance, watching the sunset dip below the horizon and the sky go through several shades of orange in a matter of seconds before stopping at bloodred. 'About the only thing I love about California is the sunset,' he noted wistfully.

'I feel it necessary to remind you that there is the minor matter of two heavily armed alien war fleets currently heading for Earth,' said the Doctor. 'Both with very different agendas of course, but neither of them wholly conducive to health and happiness for the human race. And I include the CIA in that, however reluctantly.'

'Oh *that*,' Control deadpanned dismissively. 'I suppose you guys could use a bit of help. In fact, I'm surprised I had to come to you. I figured you'd have been looking for my assistance a couple of days ago. Fair disappointed me, that did!'

Now the Doctor was angry. 'Help?' he squealed. 'Los Angeles is about to be destroyed.'

'Never did like this town much,' Control said, avoiding the disgusted look he received from Lethbridge-Stewart.

The Doctor, despite the provocation, could see a way to move the meeting towards a conclusion that would satisfy both sides. 'What help would you and the CIA be able to contribute?' he asked. 'Theoretically?'

'All of the CIA's expertise,' Control answered and stuck his keys in the car's ignition.

'Fine,' replied the Doctor, getting out of the car and helping the Brigadier to follow him. The pair stood mutely as Control drove off at speed, throwing up a plume of dirt as the car careered around a tight bend and disappeared from sight.

'So, what does that all mean?' asked the Brigadier.

'It means we've got a chance, I think,' replied the Doctor as he turned and started to clamber down the steep incline towards Paynter and their jeep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Holes

The man's name was Dwayne Landmott. When he arrived at UNIT headquarters, banging on the roller shutter and demanding entrance, Captain Paynter and two of his newly formed temporary Los Angeles regiment met him with guns and few smiles and asked what the hell he wanted in a secure area.

'I'm from the CIA,' Landmott told them, producing an identity card like it was a sheriff's badge in the middle of a gunslingers' convention. 'Control sent me to show you guys how to put the wind up these aliens.'

'Good,' noted Paynter, bundling the bearded little man in open-necked shirt and flared jeans through the door at the point of his gun. 'Come upstairs, and if we like you we won't kill you.'

The UNIT area patrol car sped along the virtually deserted Sepulveda Boulevard. What traffic there was, mostly family saloons crammed with people and belongings, was heading in the opposite direction – out of the city. These people knew, Paynter thought to himself. Soon, everyone would know and Los Angeles would resemble the Balkans as millions of refugees fled up the freeways in a seething tide of displaced humanity.

The patrol car took a corner into a side street with a squeal of rubber on tarmac that set Paynter's teeth on edge. 'Who the hell do you think you are, matey?' he called forward to the corporal doing the driving. 'Pierre-Yves Dudoin can get away with that kind of thing in Formula One pal,' he noted. 'And you're not in *The Italian Job* either!'

'Sorry, Captain,' said the driver, Murphy. He looked scared. Paynter wasn't. He was looking forward to this.

One of the first things he had done once Landmott's credentials had been established was ask the man what he knew about the Sons of Nostradamus. That actually turned out to be quite a lot, including the address where most of the surviving members of the inner sanctum were hiding. A low-rent apartment in Northridge, said Landmott, get right over there, those guys'll just be delighted to see you.

Expecting objections from Lethbridge-Stewart, Paynter had simply taken half a dozen men, some AK47s and an APC and gone off on a bug-hunt without authority.

Just the way he and Mark had always done things.

The APC screeched to a halt and the door of the apartment was off its hinges within seconds. By the time Paynter entered the front room several shots had been fired. Two of the terrorists were slumped dead on the ground, blood pouring from head wounds. Three more were also on the floor, cowering in the corner, their hands raised dramatically above their heads in a gesture of unconditional surrender. Bill Quay and Sam Danvers were pinned to the near wall by Paynter's men. They, too, were struggling vainly to surrender.

As Paynter came in the soldiers released the two men who fell to their knees, clutching their throats and gasping for breath.

'Stand this one up,' Paynter told Corporal Murphy, pointing to Quay. Murphy did so. 'OK Def Leppard, where are the rest of your ...' Paynter paused. 'Your people.'

Quay didn't respond quickly enough. Paynter caught him, viciously, across his face with a flick of both his leather gloves. Then Paynter removed his Browning and dramatically cocked the gun to Quay's temple as the big man clutched his cheek. 'I shall not ask you a third time,' Paynter said, and he meant every word. Both Quay and Danvers knew that. So did Murphy and his men.

'Newton and Hayley are dead,' replied Bill Quay, his voice quivering with fear. 'Nobody's seen Nigel or Lynda for two days, they got out of the city if they had any sense. Ray and Jaguar were here half an hour ago, they went to get food.'

'Who planted the bomb at UNIT?' Paynter asked, quite softly and without any apparent menace.

Danvers began to speak but Paynter thrust him back against the wall, cracking the man's head against it. 'I don't recall asking you anything,' he said, before returning his attention to Quay. 'Well?'

'I did,' Quay replied, closing his eyes. 'Nigel and me and Chris. He pointed to one of the two bodies staining the carpet. 'That's Chris. We were just following orders.'

Paynter was silent for a moment and then turned to Murphy. 'Ring this in. Tell HQ we've got four terrorists and ask for transport.'

'Four sir?' asked Murphy.

'Yes,' replied Paynter. 'This one's coming for a little walk with me around the back.' Bill Quay let out a horrified wail as he grabbed him by his long hair and dragged him away from the wall. 'Come on then Just Following Orders,' the captain shouted. 'Let's be having you.'

Quay attempted to snuggle against Paynter's strong grip, but two rapid punches to the small of his back quietened his protests to a whimper. He tried to sit down, but Paynter hauled him back off the ground and dangled

him in midair, legs swinging wildly like those of a hanged man, for several seconds before pulling him towards the door. Paynter noticed Quay had lost control of his bowels. He didn't care. He had shot men who had shat in their pants when facing execution before. No big deal.

Nothing would stop him from ending this miserable long-haired scum's existence.

He turned, dragging the limp Quay behind him, to find the door barred by Corporal Murphy.

'I can't let you sir,' said the little Irish driver, hoisting his rifle up to his shoulder. 'It's not right.'

Paynter was incredulous. 'Get out of my effing way, Corporal, or I'll shoot you as well as him.'

'No you won't sir,' said Murphy, pointing the gun directly at Paynter.

'Did you know Mark Barrington?' Paynter shouted.

'Yes sir,' replied Murphy. 'He was a grand man was the lieutenant. He saved my life once, so he did.'

'Well?' Paynter said, producing the terrified Quay from behind him with the bravado of a magician pulling a rabbit from a top hat. 'This *thing* killed him.'

'I know sir,' said Murphy calmly. 'But that still don't make it right. On principle.'

Paynter couldn't believe what he was hearing. 'Who gives an effing toss about right or wrong any more? The world's about to go up in flames.'

Murphy thought for a moment and then said, 'I give a toss, sir. And UNIT does too. We're supposed to be the good guys, so we are. That's why I joined up. I have me suspicions it's why you did. I *know* it's why Mark Barrington did.'

It made sense.

That was the annoying thing. It all made sense.

Paynter let go of Bill Quay and watched the sobbing terrorist fall to the floor like a rag doll. 'Tell them you've got six prisoners then,' he said dejectedly, holding out his gun for Murphy to take.

'Five sir,' said Murphy, pushing the gun away from him. 'There's many a day I've felt like that. But I've never killed an unarmed man in cold blood when I wasn't ordered to do so. And neither have you.'

Paynter ignored him and walked through the door into the garden as the sunlight cascaded down from yet another clear blue sky.

Another day in paradise.

He sat on the grass, cross-legged, and began to rock backwards and forwards. And he wept for a fallen friend.

* * *

By the time Paynter arrived back at UNIT headquarters with his truckload of prisoners the Doctor and Landmott were already in the process of drawing up a complicated and brilliant scheme to save the planet from imminent destruction. At least, that was the way Tegan phrased it. Having expected to be torn off a strip, or demoted to the ranks, Paynter was astonished to find Lethbridge-Stewart congratulating him on the success of his capture of almost all the terrorist cell.

'Apparently the leader is dead,' Paynter managed to offer when Lethbridge-Stewart wondered about command structure.

'Yes,' noted the Brigadier, 'so our friend from the CIA informs me. He knows rather a lot about everybody's business it would seem,' Lethbridge-Stewart continued with clear irritation. 'Nevertheless, that's good work, Captain. If we survive this kerfuffle with these alien chaps it's reassuring to know that California still has the death penalty for murder.'

Paynter found himself unable to say anything in reply and was thankful when the Doctor and Agent Landmott emerged from one of the briefing rooms followed by Tyrone and Turlough. All of them were smiling and the Doctor and Landmott were chatting like old friends at a school reunion.

'... He was a servant of the Terrible Zodin,' the Doctor confided. 'Utterly without pity, but with a strange predilection for cream cakes. We got on rather well ... Ah, hello there,' he smiled genially at the Brigadier and Paynter. 'I suppose you'll be wondering what devious and complex schemes we've been cooking up in there?'

Lethbridge-Stewart joined Paynter in a moment of mute irritation.

The Doctor seemed surprised that his extreme cleverness wasn't producing the desired effect. 'Typical of the average soldier,' he told Landmott. 'Can't appreciate genius when they're exposed to it.'

'Doctor,' snapped Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Do get on with it.'

'The communication-satellite network,' said the Doctor, rushing to the door, then pausing and turning when neither the Brigadier or Paynter moved to follow him. 'Well, what are you waiting for? We've got a world to save. I'll explain on the way ...'

If the north side of the valley had been less than thronging with fleeing crowds, then Hollywood and Vermont Canyon, the twisting road that led up to Griffith Park, the highest point in the city, were the opposite. The cover story of an expected earthquake that the US government had put out had seemingly reached the public by now and the Brigadier, the Doctor and Paynter, in the patrol car with the ever-reliable Corporal Murphy, were forced to weave their way through a virtually solid wall of traffic coming down the mountain.

It was only as they reached the very summit of the road and burst into the deserted Griffith Park itself that they were finally able to accelerate away from the mass of terrified humanity below them.

‘It’s like *War of the Worlds*,’ noted Paynter, looking at the skies above him. They were already beginning to darken slightly as the first of the alien ships started to hover and mass above the clouds. ‘Book, film *and* prog-rock album!’

The Doctor’s take on the spectacle was, as his friends might have expected, a touch more cerebral. ‘There’s something to be said for races who stay at home and refuse to accept the possibility of extraterrestrial life,’ he noted.

That brought a reaction from Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘I never thought I’d hear myself saying this Doctor,’ he heard himself say. ‘But, why don’t these aliens just leave us alone?’

‘Because they don’t know any other way Brigadier.’ the Doctor replied, sadly. ‘So, however upsetting it may be for a man of peace like myself, we’re going to have to show them another way. And it’s going to hurt me as much as it’s going to hurt them.’

The tiny convoy of four armoured cars reached the observatory and the soldiers immediately began unloading the Doctor’s plethora of equipment as Paynter asked him, for what seemed the twentieth time, whether he was certain this would work.

The Doctor, not surprisingly, looked wounded. ‘Of course it will work,’ he said. ‘I think. The point is, anyway, that it gives us a fighting chance. The power-booster from the sonic relay is only a small part of the network of such devices around the world that, when linked, will form a defence grid against the alien armada.’

‘A force field?’

‘My word, you *did* watch a lot of science fiction as a boy, didn’t you?’ said the Doctor caustically. ‘Yes, I suppose that’s one, very unsophisticated, way of putting it!’

The Brigadier joined them at the chosen spot, on top of the observatory’s domed roof. ‘So these devices will prevent the aliens from taking half the world with them when they start to blow each other up?’

The Doctor knelt on the roof, fiddling with the settings on the black instrument panel in front of him. ‘Again, a rather simplistic way of looking at things. Not to mention a touch inaccurate! No, Brigadier, this won’t just bounce the alien ships off into space. I wish technology like that existed but it doesn’t, not even in my world. However, once we get the grid up and running it should cushion most of the blows that the Jex and the Canavitchi feel like throwing in our direction.’

‘And that’ll give the CIA time to wheel out their secret weapon?’ asked Paynter as the Doctor finally connected the power cable to the booster, then

on to the relay and switched on.

There was a low, ominous hum that seemed ready to break the air down to its constituent molecules.

'Something like that,' the Doctor said. 'Which I'm sure they'll be delighted to do for the good of all mankind. I'm also certain that they have one or two other surprises up their collective sleeve that they haven't seen fit to share with me.'

The Brigadier began to scramble back from the booster. 'It may be apt for us to be somewhere else,' he noted.

'Indeed,' said the Doctor as the three men climbed down from the dome and hurried back on to the lawn in front of the observatory. The Doctor began to run towards one of the jeeps but Paynter caught his arm.

'Too slow,' he shouted above the drone of the power-booster and, the Doctor realised, the distant noise of a helicopter engine. On the horizon a Chinook troop transport was swooping towards them out of the rapidly blackening sky. 'Speed being, you know, the essence and all that,' continued Paynter.

The Brigadier stood next to the Doctor and looked up towards the clouds. Already twenty or thirty black specks in the upper atmosphere were growing larger and darker and more ominous with each passing second. 'How long until the grid is fully activated?'

'A good thirty minutes, I'm afraid,' said the Doctor above the roaring sound of the helicopter. 'Any damage done before then . . . nothing on Earth will stop it.'

The Chinook came in to land and the UNIT men scrambled on board, the Doctor last of all. As the helicopter rose in the sky and turned away from Griffith Park, from the rear window the Doctor, the Brigadier and Paynter were able to see the first of the alien craft swoop down to within five miles of the highest point in Los Angeles.

The ship was a carbon copy of the one Paynter and Barrington had seen in the InterCom warehouse. Only the colour was different. 'Impressive, isn't it?' he asked no one in particular.

The ship came lower and lower, almost touching the point where the grid would, eventually, repel it. But the grid was, as yet, inactive and the ship was able to hover in front of the enormous Hollywood sign behind Griffith Park.

The sign had stood there for decades, an announcement to the rest of the world that this place was unique. A monument to a city built on dreams and fantasies.

No one would ever know if the aliens on board the ship had any idea of its significance for millions of people. Whether their actions were a deliberate

and provocative terror tactic meant to stun the watching world. Or whether they did what they did for no reason other than pure effect.

But it was to become as memorable an image as the world had ever seen.

The ship charged up its weapons and fired off a series of laser bolts that smashed the proud letters of the sign to matchwood.

‘Oh dear,’ sighed the Doctor from the UNIT helicopter as the dust settled on the hill. ‘There goes the neighbourhood.’

Somewhere on a deserted highway miles north of Los Angeles, with tumbleweeds drifting aimlessly down the road – a scene that could have been drawn from the frames of a John Ford dust-howl Western – Control picked up the in-car telephone as it burst into life.

It was the call he had been waiting for. The single most important he would ever receive.

How ironic, then, that no one – not UNIT or the Doctor, not the great American public, nor even the President who didn’t realise who Control truly worked for – would ever know to whom he was speaking, or how the conversation was about to affect the future of the entire human race.

Because, on such anonymous, trivial conversations, the fates of worlds are decided.

‘Yes,’ Control said simply. ‘They’ve agreed to play it our way for once.’

There was a significant pause whilst, at the other end of the line, information was processed, analysed and, finally, commented upon. ‘I agree,’ said Control, when the voice finally spoke. ‘Let’s have us some carnage.’

The car drove off down the road, leaving the tumbleweeds to their perpetual lonely journey.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Waiting for Today to Happen

‘It’s a plan diabolical in its ingenuity, I’ll give the CIA that,’ the Brigadier had noted as the Doctor and his friends sat in one of UNIT’s nuclear fallout bunkers deep beneath the Mojave desert near Joshua Tree. The airlift evacuation had been a scrambled, hurried affair that had reminded Lethbridge-Stewart of Berlin in 1961. Particularly with a battle of cosmic proportions beginning to rage above them whilst slowly, inch by inch, the network grid was becoming fully operational.

‘Only the CIA were able to co-ordinate such efforts, getting NASA and the National Security Agency around the table with us . . . We could never have managed that,’ the Doctor agreed sadly. ‘I’m afraid that says something very significant about all of us.’

Thankfully, everyone was now accounted for. And everybody had a job to do. Tegan, Turlough, Natalie, Corporal Murphy, Tyrone, Paynter . . . They all sat at computer screens, earphones in place, in direct contact with one of the numerous UNIT tracking stations around the world, listening for any tiny scraps of information about the war taking place in the burning sky far above their sterile world of artificial light. For confirmation that the grid was in place, holding strong and deflecting (or at least partially deflecting) debris, fallout from the battle or, worst of all, attempts by one or both sides to land on the planet and use it as a beachhead for further aggression.

It was a mind-numbingly mundane task and it could only be achieved by a constant rotation of duties, taking time away from the terminals to drink coffee, relax and try to rest on the makeshift wooden beds that had been constructed in the late 1950s when it was believed that this shelter would only ever be needed if the Soviets decided to push the button.

‘Who’d have thought it?’ Paynter asked, removing the dog-eared paperback book that covered his eyes and sitting up on one of the beds as his rest period came to an end. Natalie handed him a steaming hot cup of strong tea with three sugars.

‘I’m good at guessing things usually,’ the Doctor noted with a thin varnish of sarcasm.

‘Who would have thought that SDI would have actually achieved anything?’

Paynter said.

'What is, I suppose, even more ironic,' the Doctor noted, sitting on the edge of Paynter's bed with his own mug of tea, 'is that many of the satellites the CIA have turned into weapons platforms were those InterCom themselves put up into space to carry their communications around the world.'

At his terminal the Brigadier turned and smiled. 'The grid is holding,' he said triumphantly. 'It's carnage up there and not much of it is getting through to Earth.'

'Victims of their own ambition,' noted the Doctor. 'Isn't that usually the way?'

'So you keep telling me,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, after a pause for reflection. 'And still they come . . .'

In the vast blackness of space, the fleets assembled. In many ways the battle lines were not dissimilar to those on ancient Earth when two enormous ranks of warring men faced each other, one to one, across a stretch of land, their weapons primed for the kill.

Jex and Canavitchi craft weaved in and out of fixed orbital positions, jockeying for the ideal spot from which to begin their attacks. Occasionally, a group of ships would break off from the main fleet and engage in running skirmishes with stragglers from the opposition. But in the main the attacks were orderly, and huge. Ranks of one fleet would charge at the other, weapons systems pouring everything they had at the enemy. They would be repelled and a counterattack would begin, with the same outcome.

Individual fighter craft on both sides, piloted by the brave and the foolhardy, circled the main battle, closing in for a series of spectacular and daring dogfights. Explosions took place, but in the vacuum of space they were mute and extinguished within the blinking of an eye.

It was some hours before reports began to filter through from the various UNIT and civilian tracking stations around the globe. But once a pattern had been established, the news was all good.

The grid was holding.

As more and more alien ships entered the Earth's atmosphere they were either becoming stuck, like flies, in a spider's web of electronic pulses and high-frequency sound waves sent out by the satellites that literally shook the spacecraft to pieces. Or, even more impressively, they were flung off into space at an astronomically implausible speed by the grid which, similarly, wasn't wholly in line with their tolerance thresholds.

It was ridiculous, the Doctor told himself at one point during their lengthy vigil, that the CIA hadn't volunteered this solution earlier. But that, he sadly

concluded, said much about an organisation that seemed to celebrate the art of double bluffs, and revel in the beauty and sophistication of complex games. And always had done so, for as long as he had known and associated with them.

He looked around the room at the tired, strained faces of his friends and felt a sense of helplessness. He had been asked to help Lethbridge-Stewart discover whether a company posed a threat to the security of Earth and, in that regard he had succeeded. But at what cost? The lives of Mark Barrington and David Milligan, not to mention numerous others in the bomb attacks. And that was only the human casualties.

As on many previous occasions, the Doctor found himself posing a question that he seemed to be asking more and more these days. *Would all of this still have happened if I hadn't been here?*

It was inevitable, perhaps, that the mood in the bunker should push him into such introspection. But, as he had told Tyrone on the hill overlooking Los Angeles a few days earlier, once again he had concerns about his life style and the nature of the evil that he fought and continued to fight.

At what point does battling with monsters make you a monster yourself?

The business with Turlough, especially, troubled him. The boy was old beyond his years, the Doctor knew that. And, though Turlough was guarded about his background and anything else before the Black Guardian and Brendon School, the Doctor knew him well enough to be certain that his experiences in the apartment must have affected him greatly.

One doesn't get tortured in a good way.

Turlough was sitting on one of the beds, seemingly wrapped in the fog of his own thoughts, staring into space with vacant, clouded eyes.

'Hello,' said the Doctor crouching down beside his friend.

It took Turlough an age to reply. 'Oh hello,' he said at last. 'I'm sorry, I was miles away.'

'Literally or metaphorically?' asked the Doctor, expecting no reply and receiving none. Perhaps that, in itself, was a relief. 'I just wanted to ask if you were recovered,' he continued, sitting beside Turlough and giving him a reassuring pat on the back. 'It was a dreadful experience and ...'

'I'm fine,' said Turlough, though his eyes told a different story.

The Doctor stood up. 'I'm glad,' he said, genuinely. 'But if you ever want to talk about it ...' He let his voice trail away. Turlough turned briefly towards him, as though he had something vitally important to tell him. But then the moment was gone and the boy returned his attention to his own thoughts. A private world marked 'keep out'.

Once again, the Doctor found that he was actually relieved.

And that horrified him.

* * *

Night and day lost all meaning as the vigil continued.

The first bad news came when Tegan reported that the grid had broken somewhere over the Pacific Ocean. The strain of maintaining the network over such vast distances had finally become too great in the early hours of the second day of the battle.

'Nothing too significant has been affected,' she noted. 'There's not much civilisation there.' She realised what she had said just as Paynter began laughing and pointing at her.

'Shut up!' she said, and slapped him playfully on the top of the arm. 'The tear's miles from Australia.'

'I've got a cousin in Hawaii,' said Mel Tyrone from the far side of the bunker, making himself a sandwich. 'I hope she's all right.'

That silenced the hilarity.

Lethbridge-Stewart, inevitably perhaps, was the person to say the right thing at the right time. 'That's all any of us can hope,' he noted. 'But we have to be positive.'

So they were.

'What would you miss most about the world if it were to blow up today?' asked Natalie suddenly.

The Brigadier was rather taken aback by the question. 'If the world were to blow up, Private Wooldridge,' he said sharply, 'then I should imagine that I'd blow up with it. Therefore the question doesn't apply.'

Natalie, for possibly the first time in her life, raised her voice to Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Just *suppose*,' she said, testily.

The Brigadier thought for a moment. It was, he was forced to concede, an interesting question. 'The seafront at Bognor,' he said. 'Especially when I'm walking along it with my wife and the beach is virtually deserted. After about a mile we can turn round and look at the tracks of our footprints along the sand. And the feeling of the rain and the wind on your face. Which should be unpleasant but, sometimes, isn't.'

'I'd also miss the ocean,' offered Mel Tyrone, sitting down beside them. 'I love to go down to Pacific Park at night when it's quiet and watch the moon on the surface. I don't know why, you can't explain those kind of things in words.'

'No, you can't,' said Lethbridge-Stewart with a kindly smile. 'Like reading *Wisden* during the winter nights when you think you'll never be warm again, trying to remember what summer is actually all about. And I'd miss Sunday morning, sitting around with nothing to do but read the newspaper and listen to *Gardeners' Question Time* on the radio. And fall asleep in the chair until it's

time for lunch.’ He tapped the tin mugs that he held in his hands. ‘I’d miss tea too . . . At least if it’s well made!’

Natalie made an apologetic face. ‘I’d miss travel. Holidays in the sun. Seeing the world that’s out there and being constantly and utterly surprised by it.’ She ignored the astonished looks she was receiving from almost everyone in the room. ‘I suppose I’d miss my friends too. And my cat. And shopping.’

Paynter joined them. ‘I’d miss nights out with my mates. Nights when you understand the value of true friendship, something that’s enduring and lasts a lifetime. Even if you don’t see each other very often. *Because* you don’t see each other very often.’

The conversation stopped and Natalie looked around the room at a bunch of tired faces, all following what they were saying. ‘Anybody else?’

‘Sex,’ shouted Corporal Murphy, to general ribald cheers.

‘The lad’s got a point,’ noted Paynter without irony. ‘In a very basic human sense, of course!’

Tegan desperately wanted to add something to all this, but she found herself unable to. *I’ve been away from Earth for too long* she told herself as she sat next to Paynter and held his hand. The captain turned to face her and smiled. ‘And I’d miss you,’ he whispered to her.

‘I’d miss you too, I guess’ she replied.

‘What about human achievements?’ asked the Doctor, who was seated at one of the terminals. ‘I know I’m an outsider here, but . . .’

‘That gives you perhaps the best insight of all of us,’ said Mel Tyrone. ‘You must keep coming back for a reason?’

As the Doctor began to answer Lethbridge-Stewart interrupted with a thought. ‘Suppose that Earth did get blown-up, what do you think the human race would be remembered for?’

‘Michelangelo,’ offered Tyrone. ‘Shakespeare, Mozart, da Vinci. The things those men achieved could never die, surely?’

‘No,’ said Paynter. ‘It’ll be *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* and *Star Wars* and stuff like that. Films and TV and rock and roll, the art forms of the twentieth century, *they’re* what makes life really bearable! Give me Bogart and Steve McQueen over some fifteenth-century painter and decorator any day!’

‘You jest, of course?’ asked the Brigadier.

‘Well, maybe a little bit,’ said Paynter, thoughtfully. ‘But I’ll tell you what, if we’re talking real desert-island stuff here, then I’d want *Revolver* with me in my coffin, way ahead of the Sistine Chapel. Best LP ever made, that.’

Tyrone was puzzled. ‘Better than *Otis Blue* or *Astral Weeks* or *Blonde on Blonde?*’

‘They’re all good, don’t get me wrong,’ Paynter said quickly. ‘But . . .’

'Well I'd like to offer a vote for *Can Anyone Tell Me Where the Revolution Is?* at this point,' Natalie said, raising her hand.

There was a series of extravagant dismissive gestures from around the room. 'Oh come on,' said Paynter. 'The Star Jumpers were all right. I liked them. That Johnny Chester wrote some great songs, but they only released four LPs and one of *them* wasn't very good . . . !'

'Excuse me.' The Doctor's voice cut through the beginnings of what was promising to be a long and bitter argument. 'Do you want to end your lives squabbling about the greatest album in the world ever?'

Paynter saw the funny side of the situation. 'Maybe only pop music can save us now!'

Above the stratosphere the battle raged on. Through the communications satellites, many of which had been launched by the very race whose members were now dying, humanity watched the war of the gods taking place just outside the planet's atmosphere. Wave after wave of Jex ships threw themselves at the Canavitchi lines. There was counterattack after counterattack, each with diminishing results. And, every so often, those same satellites fired white-hot bolts of death at anything that came close enough to them to die.

The casualties were appalling. In less than a day a quarter of both fleets was destroyed or damaged beyond repair. The flagships of the Jex and Canavitchi were crammed to bursting with the survivors of their armadas.

But back down on Earth something very strange happened.

The first that most people knew about what was going on high above them was when a series of grave official statements began to interrupt television programmes across the planet, each more sombre than the last. The event, suddenly, became global. A shared multimedia experience for billions of people. Many didn't believe what they were being told – that aliens were at war with each other above the stratosphere, and that thanks to a unique partnership between the United Nations and 'various member state security organisations' a defensive web had been set up which could, at least partially, protect the planet from the ravages of the battle. That the first announcements were made during TV prime time in the United States initially suggested that the whole thing was a devious Orson-Welles-like publicity stunt dreamed up by desperate networks looking for ratings. But most people stayed up all night anyway, watching events unfold with a mixture of incredulity and fear. And then across the world, in twenty-four different time zones, when dawn broke with fresh televised pictures of the pyrotechnic display in the heavens most people came to the inescapable conclusion that the end of the world was nigh.

What was most surprising was that they were pretty *all right* about it.

A lot of people, it was true, crammed all their worldly possessions into their cars and ventured out of the cities in desperate columns, panicked despite official pleas for calm, and watched the spectacle in the sky from forests and mountains and other isolated spots.

Most, however, stayed at home with families and friends. They held parties with those they loved (or those they liked, or even those they tolerated) and watched the unfolding events with a resignation that was appropriately passive and uniquely human. *If we're going to die as innocent bystanders, the reasoning went, then we might as well have a good time and get loaded before it happens.*

And so, for three days, broadcasters across the planet covered the events in the heavens to the exclusion of everything else, taking their pictures from those satellites that weren't dispensing death to aliens and sharing what information they had. They held live broadcasts from various strategic points that had really good views of the battle above, and filled in the rest of the time with celebrity interviews about the crisis. No one outside the television industry went to work, no child went to school. Businesses and shops closed and everybody got on with the serious business of watching the end of the world on TV.

There were a few, surprisingly few, isolated outbreaks of looting and mayhem (the one in Manila in which fifteen people were shot by the police was the worst). There were some riots in one or two big cities, mostly in America. (A hastily arranged end-of-the-world rock festival in Seattle turned into an excuse for some rioting but, since the media was occupied elsewhere, hardly anyone noticed.) And there were a few crackpot religious groups who went around wagging their fingers at everyone and saying "we told you so".

But most people ignored them because, after all, nobody likes a smart arse.

A slew of fundamentalist groups used battle as an excuse to launch verbal attacks on those opposed to their beliefs and generally, for a few days, everybody who hadn't been invited to an end-of-the-world party was depressed and grumpy.

Not much different from normal, in fact.

A few old scores were settled. Some neighbours took the gun from the cupboard under the stairs, and visited the person next door who played his records extremely loudly at two o'clock in the morning when they had to be up to go to work at seven. An astonishingly small number of people chose to commit suicide rather than face the horror of what was to come. And, with all shops, supermarkets and grocery stores closed, the maxim that a civilisation will descend into anarchy when deprived of a couple of meals was put to the acid test.

But most people who found themselves down to their last tin of spaghetti

and their last packet of chocolate-chip cookies, did what anyone sensible would do in such circumstances. They found an end-of-the-world party at the bottom of their street and asked, nicely, if they could join in.

And so, out of the adversity, many new friendships were formed.

There were some great parties. Celebrity ones in Los Angeles, New York, Paris and London. Those world leaders who weren't hiding under the beds in former nuclear shelters held their own. It was said that Nelson Mandela's end-of-the-world party was the best in all Africa.

The grid held. A few holes were breached within it late on the second day when the buffeting became a deluge. Molten debris from the fire-fight above rained down upon a dozen, mostly uninhabited, coral islands in the Pacific. Pieces of crashed spacecraft also got through the defences in some other places, although thankfully these were mostly large stretches of open sea or desert. An unlucky few people died when hit by stray debris. Two houses in West Yorkshire, one in Devon and a street in south London were destroyed. A small farming community in Virginia. A hamlet in Croatia. A village in Senegal. In the largest single incident a burning Canavitchi ship ploughed through the hole over the Pacific and then flew on, under the grid, and finally crashed into a town on the eastern coast of Japan. Sixteen hundred people were killed in the disaster and many thousands more injured. Thankfully, nothing else even approaching this scale happened elsewhere and the grid was patched up, keeping fatalities to a minimum.

The BBC, which would eventually win numerous awards for its eighty-three-hour live coverage of the catastrophic events, managed to arrange a satellite interview with Lethbridge-Stewart in the bunker in California, through a contact who had been to school with him. The old soldier was as honest and forthright as he had ever been, or would ever be, about the causes of the crisis.

'It's our own fault, at least in part,' he told the startled audience at home. 'We embrace new technology without fully understanding its uses. We allow companies to take control of our lives because they provide us with something we want. And we casually believe that every alien in the universe, no matter how powerful, can be stopped because we've got UNIT. Maybe we need to become a little more cynical and stop being so trusting.' A little later, during a second interview, he was able to confirm that the aliens had used a front organisation in the shape of InterCom to try and take Earth from within. 'Who knows how many other aliens might be out there, in your workplace, in your schools, in your streets.'

When he had finished the interview, the Brigadier turned to find the Doctor looking concerned behind him.

'That was all a little hysterical, don't you think?' the Time Lord asked.

Lethbridge-Stewart was genuinely puzzled. 'All these years you've been telling me to be vigilant, to watch the skies . . . Well, I believe you. Today more than ever. You were right, Doctor, the universe is full of the most terrible evil. And it must be fought.'

'Just so long as you don't start looking for it where it doesn't exist,' the Doctor said sadly. 'That way lies madness, the Salem witch trials and Nazi Germany.'

And still the Jex and the Canavitchi threw every last instrument of death that they possessed at each other. With livid hatred they fought on and on, as ship after ship was attacked, strafed by lasers, pummelled by explosives, shaken by sonic bombardment, subjected to lethal doses of radiation and, finally, dispatched to atoms by sustained bursts of energy. Spectacular pictures flashed around the globe of Jex and Canavitchi ships whose tolerance levels were finally breached disintegrating and evaporating in a white-hot glow.

In the ninetieth hour of the battle a strange communication signal was received by Tegan. At first she thought that the irregular series of radio blips was random interference. Then she started to see a pattern on the monitor in front of her. 'Doctor,' she called. 'Have a look at this will you?'

'It's not from any of the tracking stations,' the Doctor confirmed, just as the screen locked on to the source of the signal and accepted the incoming transmission. A domed alien head, with raw flesh and tiny red eyes filled the screen. Both Tegan and Natalie almost fell out of their chairs.

'I am the commander of the Jex League,' the creature said in halting English. 'This war is over.'

'Delighted to hear it,' replied the Doctor, standing aside for Lethbridge-Stewart to speak to the alien.

'Now see here,' began the Brigadier strongly, 'your forces have been decimated. I think you should just pack up and leave, don't you?'

'I am to inform you,' the alien commander said, 'and via you, all of your planet, that you can keep your stinking little world.'

The screen went blank.

' . . . And a good day to you too,' said the Brigadier laconically.

Moments passed and then the first of the remaining Jex ships began to leave orbit. The procedure was slow and awkward, and difficult to follow on fixed satellite pictures that merely showed one patch of the sky, but after a few minutes it was clear that the Jex were running.

Now, only one problem remained.

'Surely the Canavitchi will go too?' asked Paynter.

There was a deathly silence as everyone looked at the screen. The Canavitchi fleet, which had been as decimated as the Jex one, remained exactly where it was.

'Perhaps,' the Doctor noted. 'Or perhaps they'll try to destroy the Earth. To obliterate every last trace that the Jex were ever here. I imagine we'll find out quite soon.'

Time inched onwards. Caught in the amber of the moment, as seconds stretched into infinity.

No one said anything, few even dared to breathe.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maybe Tomorrow

Across the world, in houses, flats and halls, in African and Indian villages where hundreds sat huddled around a single television set, in the Australian outback, the furthest reaches of China, the frozen wastes of northern Russia, the mountains of Tibet, the plateaus of Central America and the valleys of Egypt. In Peru, Bulgaria, Syria and New Zealand, the world held its collective breath across each and every continent.

'They're leaving,' shouted someone in the bunker. A few minutes stand-off had become a lifetime. The worried faces remained pensive and watchful for a few seconds of additional stress as everyone looked for further signs of departure.

The Brigadier was thinking of Doris, who was staying with some friends on the Sussex coast.

He looked at the Doctor, whose face betrayed nothing of the anxiety that the Brigadier knew his old friend felt. Because he felt it too.

'They're leaving,' repeated Corporal Murphy.

'They *are* as well you know,' said Paynter. 'My God, they're turning around and going.'

But still everyone in the bunker held their collective breath. For a long moment they made no sound, until the last of the Canavitchi ships disappeared from sight and into the thick blackness of space. Then, and only then, did they explode in noise just as, around the world, end-of-the-world parties were exploding with celebrations and fireworks.

They were kissing each other, hugging, shaking hands, barely able to say words that would mean anything at a time like this, so simply making sounds instead.

Delighted sounds of survival.

And amid the carnival atmosphere one figure stood alone watching the screen, oblivious to the pats on his back and the cries of joy around him. Finally, the Doctor turned around, his face as grave as anyone had ever seen it.

The noise in the room died instantly, reduced to total silence.

'It would appear,' the Doctor said in an emotional voice, 'that humanity has survived this insanity. Next time, we may not be so fortunate.'

Coded Messages

- > From: Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart (aglstewart@UNIT.com.uk)
- > Sent: Friday, 10 January 2003 6:28 p.m. [GMT]
- > To: Gabrielle Graddige (gabby@vgpublishing.co.uk)
- > Subject: Re: 'The InterCom Affair'

Dear Miss Graddige,

Thank you for your correspondence of 9 January concerning my perceptions of the so-called 'InterCom Affair'.

Ordinarily I have little time for questions about UNIT's work. Indeed, I am often specifically prevented by the Official Secrets Act and other security restraints from discussing cases of this kind. However, as the events you are researching have become such a media *cause célèbre* in the three years since they took place, particularly in light of the UN Security Council report on the circumstances leading up to the Jex-Canavitchi war, and also the recent – and in my opinion highly inaccurate and sensationalist – film *The Day the World Turned Dayglo* (sic), I see no reason not to discuss the matter with you.

In your particular case I must say that I was most moved by your own personal loss, that of your cousin Sergeant David Milligan VC, a fine soldier and a decent and honourable man with whom it was my privilege to serve. In the interests of setting the history of these events straight and in their proper context, I am therefore happy to be able to answer the questions that you pose in the hope that your proposed book, *War in Space – the Real Story* will finally be able to remove some of the more outlandish rumours that have surrounded these events. And UNIT's involvement in them.

I would therefore, under these circumstances, be happy to be interviewed by yourself and I would ask you to contact my office at your earliest convenience to arrange this.

Sadly, however, I have to inform you that it will not be possible for you to speak with UNIT's scientific consultant Doctor Smith for reasons that I am not, at present, at liberty to divulge.

Yours very sincerely

Lethbridge-Stewart

Text taken from *The Man Who Saved the World – Memos, Letters and E-mails of Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT*. Edited by Russell Farway
(London Multimedia Publishing: 2052)

Epilogue

Time's Up

It had been the strangest of weeks.

In the aftermath of the war the entire world had seemed to make a collective decision to carry on with the party for a few more hours. And they did, like they had never partied before, high on being no longer under sentence of death. Then everybody went to bed and woke up the next morning with a bit of a hangover, as though nothing had happened.

Everyone went back to work. All the children returned to school. The stores all opened (though for a few days there were shortages) and everything got back to normal with a minimum of fuss and bother.

A few neighbours were arrested for murder, but the courts were surprisingly lenient for a while, especially where provocation could be proved. The international community got together to help those areas most affected by breaches in the defence grid and InterCom quietly closed all its offices before gangs of local toughs came round and closed them down for them.

Tegan and Geoff Paynter went to dinner one evening in Marina del Ray at the restaurant Mark Barrington had recommended to Paynter. They had a nice time, but spent the entire evening talking around the one subject they both knew really needed to be addressed.

Finally Paynter decided to grasp the nettle. He stopped Tegan in the middle of some frivolous chatter about one of the planets she had visited.

'I just want to know one thing,' he said, holding her hands. 'Are you staying?'

Tegan didn't reply for a long time. Then, finally, she summoned up the courage. 'No,' she said simply. 'I can't.'

Paynter breathed out slowly. 'In a way I'm glad,' he said. 'We both know I'm married to the job.'

'That's true,' replied Tegan, taking a sip of wine. She stared at her plate for a while and then continued. 'Besides,' she said, 'somewhere out there is a twenty year older version of me. I wonder what she's up to?'

Light flooded into the cell. The prisoner blinked, her eyelids cutting out the stinging pain.

After many hours in the isolated darkness the change was sudden and brutal.

‘Good evening,’ said the black man. ‘My name is Melvyn Tyrone and I’d like to ask you some questions.’ He paused and turned to his left. ‘This is Sergeant Natalie Wooldridge who is here to observe this little chat. I apologise for keeping you so long but Sergeant Wooldridge has just been promoted and we’ve been having a bit of a celebration.’ Tyrone smiled, charmingly. ‘Every cloud has a silver lining,’ he noted.

The prisoner said nothing.

‘So, Ms Stonebringer. If that is, indeed, your real name. I’d like to start with a simple question about your orientation.’

Still, the prisoner said nothing.

‘What *are* you?’

Tyrone sat and placed a cup of steaming coffee on the table. He glanced at Natalie who took up a position beside the door to the cell. It was clearly going to be a long night.

‘We have all the time in the world,’ said Tyrone, removing his spectacles and cleaning them. ‘At UNIT we have many years of practice at acquiring the information we need. Silence is only a locked door. All that we require is the key.’ He placed a pocket tape recorder on the table next to the coffee and switched it on. ‘20:14. Interview one. Ms Stonebringer, perhaps you’d like to start by telling us how you were recruited to InterCom?’

The door marked ‘silence’ remained locked. For the moment.

Back at UNIT headquarters the Doctor was pleased to find that Corporal Murphy and his capable men had found the TARDIS and hauled it across Los Angeles from its resting place on Sunset Boulevard. The graffiti would wash off, the Brigadier assured him.

Discussing the war’s aftermath was a more problematical business. ‘We’ve been here before,’ noted the Brigadier, after he had informed the Doctor that the mopping-up operation on surviving Jex and Canavitchi agents would take a long time. ‘There may be hundreds of them out there, under deep cover. The ones with connections to InterCom should be easy enough to arrest, but who knows how many more spies are active right now? They might be all over the world, some in positions of great power.’

The Doctor was silent. He had seen the world tipped to the brink of destruction again. And *again*, it had survived. How many more times would he be in the right place at the right time?

‘Get the CIA to help you,’ he told the Brigadier cryptically, as he went looking for Tegan and Turlough so that they could say their goodbyes.

Second Epilogue

Complete Control

The sun was setting over the Golden Gate Bridge.

San Francisco in late July commanded an awesome view at sunset, Control told himself as he watched the last rays of the sun from his office window.

‘So,’ he said, turning round, ‘we were discussing alien infiltration, were we not?’

Greaves looked unhappy. ‘Doesn’t any of this bother you?’ he asked.

Control seemed to have been expecting the question. ‘Tommy Bruce asked me the same thing many times Frank. He was always looking for a way out.’

‘Who?’

‘One of your predecessors. A fine man but, you know, weak. That’s what I like about you, Frank. You’re strong like me.’

Frank Greaves took this as a compliment, although with Control one could never be too certain. ‘So,’ he said at last. ‘What’s next on the agenda?’

‘We have a lot coming up in the next few years,’ Control said. ‘A whole bunch of invasions and attempted invasions, infiltrations, time anomalies. We have many games to play. And to win.’ Control stood up and picked up the case file for the Jex that Greaves had carefully compiled. He walked over to a massive filing cabinet and placed the file in its correct chronological position.

‘But what happens if we *don’t* win next time?’ asked Greaves.

Control seemed amused by the question. ‘We will,’ he said simply. ‘With the Doctor on our side, we can’t lose.’

Thank You (Fallethinme Be Mice Elf Agin)

There are many people who, literally, wouldn't quit bugging me until I wrote this, my first solo novel: Ian Abrahams for one. If Abie tells you to do something, you do it. Even if it takes you fifteen years. Endless thanks are also due to Martin Day, my *Yoda*, who co-created three of the characters featured here with me in *The Devil Goblins from Neptune*. To my editor Justin Richards who gave me enough rope to hang myself and to Colin Brake who provided me with some very interesting input late in the day.

The genesis of *The King of Terror* goes back to February 1998 and my first visit to the West Coast of the USA for the 'Nine Lives of Gallifrey' convention. Many of those I met (then and on two subsequent trips) contributed ideas, thoughts and comments that have found their way into this book including: Gary Akers, Robbie Bourget, Suze Campagna, Steve Cole, Paul and Wendy Comeau, Robert Franks, Elsa Frohman (*told* you it'd be a Fifth Doctor novel), Gary Gillatt, Judi Grant, Alryssa and Tom Kelly, Jane and Tony Kenealy, Theresa Lambert, Michael Lee, Shaun Lyon, Christian McGuire, Mark McHugh, Charles and Heather Martin, Jon Miller, Ingrid Oliansky, Felicia O'Sullivan (who got me into Delerium), Lars Pearson, Bruce Robinson, Gary Russell, Rhonda Scarborough, Jill Sherwin, Trina Short (for giving me some delicious ideas on what to do with Turlough), Paul Steib and Wendy Wiseman, Kathy Sullivan, Mike Tucker and Michelle Wolf. Not forgetting the *great* Nick Courtney (whom I consulted on the Brigadier's retirement whilst sitting by a swimming pool in Van Nuys) and the *great* Terrance Dicks (who graciously allowed me to put his 'mission statement' into the novel). And many more too numerous to list.

Susannah Tiller created the character of Jacqueline Maguire and she has my eternal gratitude for allowing me to use her creation in a throwaway line. Similarly Paul Cornell helped to make sure that *The King of Terror* didn't contradict the Brigadier's future in *The Shadows Of Avalon*. Respect is also due to Dan Ben-Zvi, Chris Cornwell, Andy Cowper, the God-like genius of Jeff Hart, Special K and the '93 *Promotion Possé* (for all those happy away-days), Mick Lovell my English and history teacher at Walker Comprehensive (a school that did as much for my personal education as myxomatosis does for the average rabbit), my agent John McLaughlin, Mark Phippen at *Perfect Timing*,

Steve Purcell (and the legendary Ted Butler), Paul Simpson and all of those fanzine editors who let me write fiction for them when I couldn't get arrested elsewhere. And especially Rob Francis and Jackie Marshall who were instrumental in my early work reaching a wider audience. Not forgetting those five little words on rec.arts.drwho that inspired this novel: 'On your own? Yeah. Sure.'

Thanks also to Peter Davison, Janet Fielding and Mark Strickson whose performances on *Doctor Who* in the early 1980s made me want to become a writer and put my words into their mouths. And, as ever, to my family for being there when I needed them. Also an indulgent, but necessary, thank you to two of my favourite British pop groups, James and Cast whom I saw live during a period when my inspiration juices were at their lowest. That night in December 1999 fired me up and gave me a soundtrack for the rest of the book. Nice one. Top.

I consulted several twentieth-century translations of Nostradamus's prophecies when researching this hook, but the bewildering array of opinions on what they actually say (let alone what they *mean*) finally led me to do my own (extremely bad) translations. Which is, I suppose, the whole point of this novel. That, depending on your agenda, words can be twisted to say whatever you want them to say.

Scarily, in a novel that concerns predictions and prophecies, at almost exactly the same moment that I was writing the beginning of Chapter Seven, about a minor earthquake hitting Los Angeles, a major real-life one was happening 100 miles east of the city. If the rest of the book has come true by the time it's published, I apologise in advance to everyone on the planet.

Keith Topping.

His Gaff.

Merrie Albion.

The Year 2000 (Common Era)

About the Author

A full-time survivor, Keith Topping was born in 1963 in Newcastle upon Tyne, part of England's grim industrial north, on the very day that his beloved United lost 3-2 at home to Northampton Town. Things haven't improved much since.

Keith has written extensively for numerous music, television and sport magazines and is a former contributing editor on *Dream Watch*. First published in 1993 as one of the authors of *The Guinness Book of Classic British TV*, Keith subsequently coauthored twelve books including *The Doctor Who Discontinuity Guide*, *The New Trek Programme Guide*, *The Avengers Dossier*, two editions of *X-Treme Possibilities – A Paranoid Rummage Through The X-Files*, the critically acclaimed *Shut It! – A Fans Guide to 70s Cops on the Box* ('Book of the Month' in *Loaded* magazine) and – with Martin Day – the *Doctor Who* novels *The Devil Goblins from Neptune* and *The Hollow Men*. Keith's first solo publication was *Slayer – The Totally Cool Unofficial Guide to Buffy* (whose release on 6 January 2000 made him 'the first Virgin of the new millennium'). *The King of Terror* is his debut solo novel.

Keith also writes and performs stand-up and has written radio comedy and an (unproduced) stage play. A failed pop star at the age of fourteen in the never-legendary Slime, he lives, works and occasionally sleeps on Tyneside. He likes extremely loud pop music, 1960s British horror movies, trashy SF-TV, chicken and king prawn curries, travel and socialising with friends.

You can visit Keith's website at <http://www.keithtopping.com>.



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